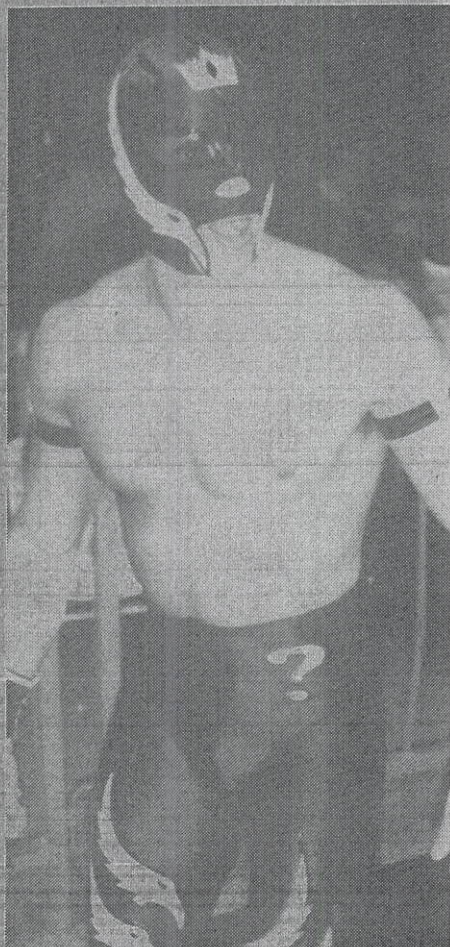
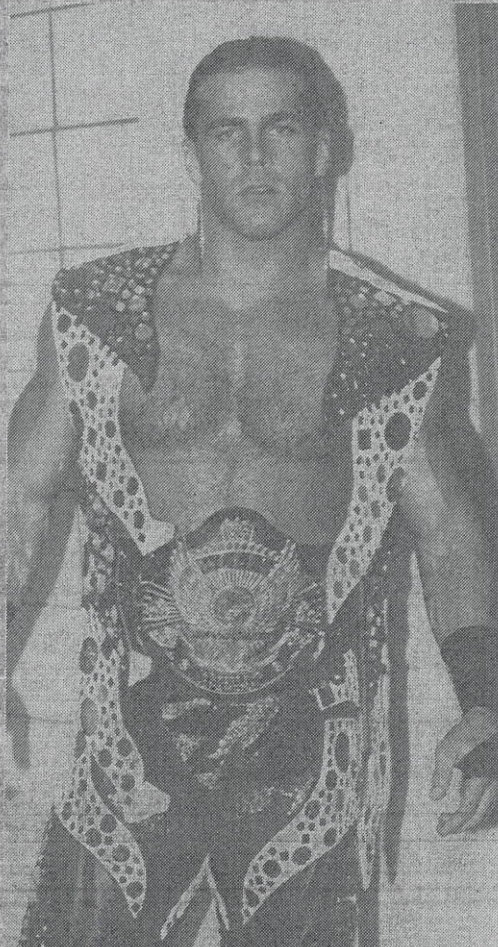


PRO WRESTLING 1996



Rey Mysterio Jr.: #3 MVP, Mexico MVP,
Best Aerial, 4 of Top 10 Matches



Shawn Michaels: MVP, Best Babyface,
Best Workrate, Reader's Top Draft Pick



Scott Hall: Top Story of Year, Best
Angle, Top 10 Draft Pick, Top Ten Heel

PRO WRESTLING TORCH 1996 YEARBOOK

EDITOR/PUBLISHER: WADE D. KELLER

All Material Copyright TDH Communications Inc. 1997. All rights reserved.

PRO WRESTLING 1996

PRO WRESTLING TORCH YEARBOOK

Introduction/Table of Contents	1
Top 50 Stories Introduction	2
#1 NWO Changes Landscape	3
#2 Hulk Hogan turns heel	4
#3 Monday Nitro takes over	5
#4 Michaels succeeds as champ	6
#5 The Bret Hart sweepstakes	7
#6 McMahon rips into Turner	8
#7 ECW hits PPV roadblock	9
#8 Austin leads new WWF crew	10
#9 WCW Cruiserweights emerge	11
#10 UFC hurt by media scrutiny	12
The Rest of the Top 50	13
Torch Year-End Awards	14
American MVP: Shawn Michaels	15
Japanese MVP: Kenta Kobashi	18
Mexican MVP: Rey Misterio Jr.	19
Match of the Year: Bret vs. Austin	20
Heel of the Year: Steve Austin	23
Babyface of the Year: S. Michaels	24
Feud of the Year: WWF vs. WCW	25
Most Valuable Team: Eliminators	26
Best Brawler: Mankind	27
Best Aerial Wrestler: Rey Jr.	28
Best Major Event: Wrestlemania XII	29
Manager of the Year: Sunny	30
Best Broadcaster: Jim Ross	31
Booker of the Year: Paul Heyman	32
Secondary Award Results	33
Torch Staff Award Picks	35
Wrestling's Most Influential List	40
Wrestling's Top Draft Picks	43
Chris Zavis's Japanese Encyclopedia	49
Bruce Mitchell's Sixth Annual Quiz	56
Torch Talk Special: Jerry Jarrett	62
1996 Yearbook Appendix	68
Past Secondary Award Winners	68
Chris Zavis's Top '96 Japan Bouts	69
Big Three Rosters and Real Names	70
Big Three '96 Title Changes	71
Big Three PPV Results/Statistics	71

Welcome to the ninth annual Pro Wrestling Torch Yearbook—titled “Pro Wrestling 1996.” This year’s book continues the tradition of the past several years, keeping a similar format while expanding one feature and replacing another.

The yearbook begins with the sixth annual “Top 50 Stories of the Year.” The introduction of that section of the yearbook puts a perspective on how 1995 fit into the past few tumultuous years in pro wrestling. The next ten pages are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of each of the top ten stories of 1996 and how those stories affected the first couple months of 1997. A listing of stories 11–50 are accompanied by brief comments on each of those stories.

The year-end awards section comes next. With a record number of reader responses to the poll, this year features more reader comments on the two most important awards—American MVP and Match of the Year. The top ten finishers in each of each of the 14 primary categories are listed plus the top three vote getters in past years along with randomly selected reader comments on their award picks. The “Secondary Awards” results follow with the top five finishers in each of the final 29 categories. This year’s awards section features an expanded section for staff picks on each of the primary awards therefore saving the space on the awards results pages for reader comments and giving us more room to explain our picks. Our secondary awards picks are listed, as usual, along with the poll results.

“Wrestling’s Most Influential List” is back for the fourth year, the only list of its kind ever compiled in wrestling. As in past years, the results will be the topic of discussion and debate in wrestling. The section includes a summary of each finisher’s year and justification for why he finished where he did in relation to others and in relation to where he finished in past years. Once again explanation is provided for why some powerbrokers from last year dropped off the list. A history of all the past lists is also included.

Our new feature this year, “Wrestling’s Top Draft Picks,” replaces the “Top 100 Rankings” of the past few years. For a change of pace, rather than analyze workrate, we asked you to send in your top five draft picks were you to start a wrestling promotion from scratch in the U.S. The list of the top 50 finishers doesn’t necessarily bare much resemblance to the top 50 ranked wrestlers on last year’s “Top 100 Rankings.” Several pages of comments are published where readers explain their picks.

Chris Zavis continues his tradition of providing the most insightful, thorough review of Japanese wrestling found anywhere. For this year’s feature, his best yet, he provides a literal history lesson, giving a perspective on how the landscape in Japan got to be as it was in 1996. He ranks the top promotions in order and reviews the highpoints of their year. He also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of each promotion as it enters 1997. If you’ve ever wanted to follow the Japanese wrestling scene a bit closer, but were overwhelmed with all of the promotions and wrestlers, this feature will not only catch you up, but it will put you ahead of many who have long considered themselves followers of Japanese wrestling.

Bruce Mitchell continues his tradition with the “Sixth Annual Year-in-Review Quiz.” As in past years, his writing speaks for itself. If you did anything strange, stupid, or silly in 1996, beware. A salvo may be headed your way.

This year we continue our rich tradition of yearbook interviews, but with a new spin. In past years we’ve done “career interviews” with major names in wrestling (Nick Bockwinkel, Terry Funk, Ted DiBiase, Konnan, Steve Austin). This year’s interview takes a different approach. Veteran wrestler, promoter, and student of the industry, Jerry Jarrett, talks about his thoughts on the top stories of 1996. The Q&A essentially follows along the top 10 stories listed earlier in the yearbook, putting a historical perspective on what was a remarkable, surprising year.

The yearbook closes once again with the Yearbook Appendix, a sort of “for-the-record” series of lists and reference material. New to the Appendix this year is Chris Zavis’s list of the top (or “most important”) 100 matches in Japan during 1996.

There is never enough space nor the proper words to express my thanks and gratitude to everyone who not only contributed to this yearbook, but another great year of growth for the PRO WRESTLING TORCH WEEKLY newsletter. I look forward to many more years of covering the wrestling industry, working hard to improve each year. I thank ahead of time those who will take time send in comments on this book and to respond to some of the content that got you thinking or disagreeing.

Wrestling's Top 50 Stories

1996

Pro wrestling in 1992 experienced its worst year of business in decades. The WWF faced publicized steroid and sex scandals and saw business drop up to 50 percent during the year in key areas of arena attendance, television ratings, pay-per-views, and merchandising. WCW was a mess with Jim Herd, Kip Frey, and Bill Watts all doing their parts to screw it up more.

In 1993, there were signs that the U.S. wrestling industry's free fall was slowing down. WWF arena attendance held steady, TV ratings stabilized thanks to Monday Night Raw, and buyrate revenue seemed to bottom out. SMW grew and ECW began to establish itself. Looking back, the most significant occurrence that year was the rise of Eric Bischoff from a low-level WCW announcer to a top WCW executive.

The wrestling industry stopped in its tracks for three weeks in the summer of 1994 as Vince McMahon was put on trial on steroid distribution charges. Not long after his "not guilty" verdict, the face of wrestling changed when Hulk Hogan signed with WCW, receiving the biggest guaranteed contract in the history of wrestling. AAA also made its first inroads into the U.S.

In 1995, the industry reshuffled its deck. WCW introduced Nitro head to head with Raw. The WWF hoped Diesel was the next Hulk Hogan. UFC tried to become a third staple of PPV along with pro wrestling and boxing. SMW went out of business as ECW began looking beyond being a viable territory and expanding nationally.

If 1995 was a year of tests, 1996 provided many answers. WCW proved to be up to the challenge of facing off head-to-head with the WWF on Monday nights. Hulk Hogan proved up to the task of revitalizing his career with a gutsy heel turn. The WWF found the most successful champion it's had since Hulk Hogan in Shawn Michaels. Eric Bischoff proved up to the task of putting his stamp on WCW during its best year ever with the NWO angle and the success of the cruiserweights. Vince McMahon was unable to win the war of words with WCW. WCW did their talking with the success of Nitro.

ECW decided the best way to succeed nationally was to play to their strengths and away from any styles that could easily or conceivably be duplicated by the Big Two. That decision to move more toward a violence-based style temporarily blocked their attempt to enter the pay-per-view field and more road blocks may still lie ahead. UFC leaped hurdles all year and began to stumble and lose momentum as a result.

By the end of 1997, the future of ECW and UFC will be more clear, and there may be a clear leader in the WWF-WCW war, which as of the start of the year was nearly a dead heat with momentum clearly on WCW's side.

Putting 1996
into historical
perspective by
examining the
biggest stories

By Wade Keller, editor

1. NWO changes landscape

Scott Hall and Kevin Nash jump from WWF to WCW, Hulk Hogan turns heel, they make WCW unstoppable

Scott Hall marched onto the set of Monday Nitro and began a series of events that changed the face of WCW. Check that. It changed the face of wrestling worldwide.

It's been called one of the best angles of all time. It's been credited with reshaping the landscape of the United States wrestling industry. As 1997 got underway, it began to dominate the storylines of the world's top promotion, New Japan.

As Ric Flair often says, "What's causing all this?"

Well, the NWO phenomena became the dominant angle in wrestling for many reasons. And most of those reasons have Vince McMahon upset, if not bitter. After all, the NWO was built around three stars who previously reached their career highpoints in his organization.

Scott Hall, recognized at the time more widely by his WWF name Razor Ramon, showed up on the set of Monday Nitro on May 27. Hall, among the top five or six wrestlers in the WWF hierarchy in the previous few years, split for WCW when Eric Bischoff made him an offer he couldn't refuse—essentially, work half as often for twice the money. Hall walking onto the set of Nitro, with no forewarning, would have been enough to shock the average wrestling viewers into sitting up in their easy chairs.

But the NWO gimmick got a lot of its legs through clever deception (traditionally not a "bad word" in pro wrestling). Hall didn't show up in WCW as "WCW's latest wrestler." No. Instead he showed up as a "WWF wrestler." He didn't say that. Eric Bischoff didn't say that. Nobody said that, but the implication was so strong that Vince McMahon, a few weeks later, had to declare on Monday Night Raw that Hall no longer worked for the WWF.

Viewers were led to believe that Hall showed up in WCW without WCW's permission. After Hall's appearance, Bischoff said he wouldn't dignify the "unnamed man's" comments.

The average viewer didn't know that Vince McMahon and Scott Hall were on far from happy employee-employer terms. When Hall gave his notice, he did so by telegram—which McMahon interpreted as a slap in the face. McMahon, either because he was personally insulted or as a way to send a warning to other employees thinking of following in Hall's footsteps, tried to get back at Hall. McMahon says it was just a coincidence (and maybe it was) that Hall was suspended from the WWF for failing a drug test the same day his notice was received. "There is nothing I can do about that coincidence," McMahon told the TORCH later that week. "People will draw their own conclusions... Anyone can say anything they want about it... But one thing is for sure—no one has anything to worry

about if they don't test positive."

But every wrestler who ever was tested for drugs when their system may not have been clean would now think twice before jumping ship, right? Well, the suspension of Hall didn't slow down his career. Instead, it did give him the motivation he might otherwise not have had to stick it to McMahon.

And boy did he stick it to McMahon.

McMahon had been airing skits on Raw depicting Ted Turner, Hulk Hogan, and Randy Savage as old, balding men. He called them Billionaire Ted, The Hulkster, and The Nacho Man. Ironically, as a "sterline alternative," he showed footage of, among others, Scott Hall.

Rather than run from the sometimes stinging accuracy of the points the WWF skits made, WCW brilliantly used them to their advantage.

"You people know who I am, but you don't know why I'm here," said Hall upon his Nitro debut. "Where is Billionaire Ted? Where is the Nacho Man? I go wherever I want, whenever I want. Where oh where is Scheme Gene because I got a scoop for you... I've got a challenge for Billionaire Ted, for the Nacho Man, and for anybody else in WCW. You wanna go to war? You wanna war? You're gonna get one... Billionaire Ted and his Big Boys, if they've got any guts, (take notice because) we're coming down here and like it or not we are taking over."

From there it was off and running. If viewers questioned whether this was an angle or if the WWF was really invading WCW without permission, the evidence for the latter grew two weeks later. The man known as Diesel, Kevin Nash, showed up with Hall. Said Nash to a flustered Bischoff: "You've been sitting here for six months running your mouth. You say this is where the big boys play, huh? Play? We aren't here to play... You couldn't get a paleontologist to get a couple of these fossils cleared? You couldn't get enough guys off dialysis machines to get them a team (to face us)? Where's Hogan. Where's Macho Man? We're here... The measuring stick just changed around here and we're it."

Nitro's ratings grew as more and more viewers tuned in to see the latest move by the yet-to-be named-by-name Hall and Nash. In retrospect, it's a bit surprising anyone at all was watching Monday Night Raw. But what's long forgotten is that the WWF's Raw beat WCW's Nitro the night of Hall's debut, 3.3 to 2.8. The WWF combated the debut of Hall with a loaded line-up for Raw featuring the first TV match for Ultimate Warrior (against Goldust), Ahmed Johnson vs. Vader, and highlights of the previous night's pay-per-view.

The next week on Raw, McMahon struck back. During the TV main event of the June 3 Raw, McMahon said: "No longer associated with the WWF in any manner are Big Daddy Cool Diesel and Bad Guy Razor Ramon. It has been reported both of these individuals plan to pawn themselves off as the stars they once were here in the WWF and furthermore perpetuate some ruse they still represent the WWF while actually under contract to a rival organization."

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

WRESTLING WEEKLY JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION

September 7, 1997

Giant joins NWO, Bulldog almost joins WCW

Secret plans for Bulldog to join NWO fell through. Waltman's debut delayed due to unresolved release

By Mike Walsh, Editor

Some promoters have been reluctant and with good reason. The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

The WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel." But the WWF has been accused of being a "wrestling monopoly" and of being a "wrestling cartel."

2.

Hulk Hogan turns heel

For his entire career people wondered whether Hogan would ever turn heel and whether he'd be effective

By the end of the year, it seemed normal. Hulk Hogan, every week on television, ripped on his fans, insulted babyfaces, and treated "the lovely Elizabeth" like a hostage. He was a bad guy.

Hogan had spent the previous fifteen years playing a superhero. He succeeded in becoming the most famous and most beloved international wrestling character in history. During most of his career, turning heel seemed as unlikely a move as a museum turning a famous painting around so they could use the back of the canvas to post current events. It wouldn't make sense.

By July 1996, it finally seemed to make sense. Turning heel was not a stupid business move. In fact, it was the obvious move.

Scott Hall and Kevin Nash entered WCW and immediately became bigger stars than they had been in the WWF. They had two things going for them that Hogan did not. For one, they were witty and cool. Hogan was repetitive and clichéd. And second, they had just jumped as main eventers for one promotion to the rival. They had tons of fresh match-ups that would demand main event status.

Hogan, for all of what he is criticized for, has never been accused of being naive to self-preservation techniques. His character had grown stale, yet he was still a main event level wrestler. His presence alone on Nitro week after week was enough to help Nitro stay neck and neck with Raw through the first eight or nine months of the Monday Night Wars. But it wasn't enough to take WCW up a level to the point of beating the WWF week after week.

With the threatening presence of Hall and Nash, the declining in popularity and growing staleness of his character, and the seemingly right set of circumstances, Hogan gambled. He turned heel.

In the weeks following their debut on Nitro, Hall and Nash promised another surprise—a third man. The build-up was such that WCW had to come up with a big name to join the NWO. Originally Lex Luger was going to be the third man. The storyline had been created where he had been acting as a spy for the NWO (or, as originally insinuated by WCW, "Team WWF") during his entire stay in WCW ever since jumping from the WWF the day of the first ever Nitro. WCW also tried to get Bret Hart to come in as the "third man," and depending on the source, it either was a distinct possibility at one time or never close to happening at that time.

Since everyone was predicting it would be Luger, and with WCW unable to reach terms with Bret in time, they looked at alternatives. Randy Savage and Sting were other possibilities, but eventually Hogan's name became a serious consideration. A few weeks before the event the

idea of it being Hogan had been penciled in. It wasn't until shortly before the event that the decision was made final.

Management literally feared Hogan would decide against it at the last second. Hogan had a habit of showing up at Monday Nitro and looking over the booking plans and scratching ideas—not just ideas he didn't know about already, but apparently ideas that had been run by him previously. He already partially turned heel, testing the water in November 1995 when he donned the black outfit and "O.J." glove, but he backed out of a full-fledged heel turn and returned to the red and yellow superhero persona.

WCW played out the angle effectively during the July 7 pay-per-view. They teased that Luger would be the third man since Sting accidentally knocked him out in the beginning of the six man tag. With Luger gone, it left Sting & Savage vs. Hall & Nash. The much advertised third man had yet to show up. Late in the match Hogan began to walk to the ring. He had a serious look on his face and didn't play to the fans as he approached the ring. When he entered the ring, he stood over a fallen Savage, then leaped into the air and legdropped him. Hogan stood, celebrated with Hall and Nash, and absorbed the shock and then the boos of the fans. He then began his first full-fledged heel interview since he became an international wrestling star.

"Mean Gene, the first thing you need to do is to tell these people to shut up if you want to hear what I've got to say," Hogan said. He went on to announce the title of their group—The New World Order. "These two men right here (Hall and Nash) came from a great big organization up north and everybody was wondering who the third man was. Well, who knows more about that organization but me, brother?... Let me tell you something. I made that organization a monster. I made people rich up there. I made the people that ran that organization rich up there. And when it all came to pass, the name Hulk Hogan, the man Hulk Hogan got bigger than the whole organization." Hogan said that Billionaire Ted promised him movies and money and big time matches, but he grew bored with it all and decided to start his own organization. Fans pelted the ring with dozens of—perhaps over a hundred—pieces of garbage.

He then tore into the fans. Five or ten years earlier he would have ripped apart the psyche of a lot more kids (and adults), although a fair share of those who still loved the idea of Hulkamania were sitting around the country in shock. "As far as I'm concerned, all this crap in the ring represents these fans out here... You can stick it. Because if it wasn't for Hulk Hogan, you people wouldn't be here. If it wasn't for Hulk Hogan, Bischoff would still be selling meat from a truck in Minneapolis."

Tony Schiavone, who by the end of the year would become the symbolic voice of WCW against the NWO, said: "We have just seen the end of Hulkamania... Hulk Hogan, you can go to hell. Straight to hell." The next night, all WCW

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

Issue No. 100 WRESTLING WEEKLY JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION July 10, 1996

Hulk Hogan tells fans to stick it, turns heel

Schiavone tells Hulk to go straight to hell after Hogan turns out to be the third man at Bash

By Mike Fisher, Editor

For an event that had two hours in the middle of their popular action, this event was the most successful WCW event in the history of the Zodiak match. WCW effectively had the advantage of who the third man would be, and that was a good thing. Hogan was the only person that any good match was possible. Hogan was the only person that any good match was possible.

Once it was time for the main event, Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man. Hogan entered the ring as the third man.

wrestlers—babyfaces and heels alike—ripped into Hogan. Sting told Hogan to "stick it."

For the final half of 1996, Hogan's interest in wrestling was rekindled. His drab, repetitive babyface interviews were replaced by inspired heel diatribes. What made his sometimes weekly NWO monologues in the ring so fascinating was that Hogan was really spewing out many of the thoughts and opinions he had but was unable to express as a babyface, especially when it came to his influence and importance to the wrestling industry. Hogan was able to unleash his massive ego on television in the form of "Hollywood Hogan."

While Hogan's turn was an aesthetic success, it was also a financial one. Hogan's turn was one of several key factors that led to Nitro dominating Raw in the ratings the last six months of the year. The impact of Hogan's heel turn should not be overestimated, either. Buyrates stayed in the same ballpark the last half compared to the first half of the year. His match as a heel against Piper at Starrcade popped an above average buyrate, but it drew a similar buyrate to what his matches against Vader in 1995 drew. While house show attendance increased, Hogan rarely wrestled at house shows.

Some argued that Hogan's turn was done not just for his benefit, but also to stunt the growth in popularity of Hall and Nash. When Hogan turned heel, his personality became the dominant one in the NWO. Hall and Nash, through sheer coolness, managed to overcome Hogan's shadow—no thanks to Hogan. The tension between Hogan and Hall & Nash never reached a break point, though.

As 1997 began, all indications were Hogan had added years to his career by turning heel. With his in-ring abilities at their weakest point in what was always a below-average working career, his heel persona made stalling and heel tactics a logical substitute for the athletic ability that at age 44 he no longer had.

Monday nights set the mood for the wrestling landscape, Bischoff stays one step ahead of McMahon all year

How did WCW, lead by Eric Bischoff, do it?

The strangest night of the year came on Nov. 4. Looking to pop a rating on their first week with their one-hour-earlier timeslot, Raw pulled the most memorable WWF angle of the year, having Steve Austin break into Brian Pillman's home to confront his former friend. When Austin broke into Pillman's house, Pillman pulled a gun and apparently fired as the camera went black. The angle may have

... sitting at a desk introducing recent highlight clips.

4. Michaels succeeds as champ

Michaels eight month reign kept WWF competitive in face of competition, but it took toll on him personally

Shawn Michaels, at 6 feet tall and around 210 pounds, could conceivably be wrestling in WCW's Cruiserweight Division. When he began wrestling in the WWF, he was seen as a future star, but not necessarily a future centerpiece of the company. In 1996, against tough odds (including the departure of several top WWF stars and the formation of the NWO), Michaels succeeded as champion. He headlined most nights during the WWF's most successful year of house show attendance of the '90s.

Michaels was seen as a star dating back to his early days as one half of the Midnight Rockers in the AWA in 1986. After wrestling for only two years, in 1986 he was seen as the younger, more marketable member of the Rockers, a team the AWA built themselves around during their last string of regular house show tours. He did not break out as a singles star until breaking up with Marty Jannetty almost ten years into his career. He turned heel on Jannetty on the memorable segment where he threw him through the "Barber Shop" segment window.

From there, Michaels hosted his own weekly segment on television, hired a bodyguard named Diesel, and developed his heel charisma. Eventually he and Diesel teamed up and feuded with Razor Ramon & 1-2-3 Kid. Michaels and Diesel were cool enough as heels that the crowds at Madison Square Garden and elsewhere began to cheer them. As is usual for the course, Michaels got cheered so much he was eventually turned babyface. He had Intercontinental Title reigns, but didn't hold the WWF Title until 1996.

When his title reign began, there was little doubt he would be able to rise to the occasion and have some great pay-per-view matches. And that he did. His victory over Bret Hart didn't meet many expectations, but was nevertheless a very good match. His defense against the departing Diesel (Kevin Nash) was phenomenal. He had a stinker of a bout against British Bulldog due in part to extenuating circumstances, but came back the next month and had a show-stealer with Bulldog. He then carried his end of a very good six-man tag match in July and carried Vader to Vader's best match of 1996 at SummerSlam. He topped that a month later against Mankind. And he topped himself by having nearly a four-star level match against the clumsy Sid, which ended his title reign.

High profile matches were not the question mark headed into his stint as champion. Other questions, though, were answered. On the road at regular house shows he received the biggest babyface reactions seen in years anywhere in the United States. The fan response was often described as "rock-star-like" in intensity when he came to the ring. The quality of his nightly matches varied and was no where near

the consistency of his his pay-per-view bouts, but he was still more often than not part of the best match on WWF cards (which, on many nights, was faint praise).

Michaels made sure he was fresh and motivated for national matches. He did what he had to in order to "get up" for house show matches and put on the best show of the night. But he dropped off in the category of interviews. Without the adrenaline rush of the crowd, his studio interviews were often repetitive and forced. His live interviews were better, but unless he had a strong issue to discuss, he sometimes faltered. His weakest aspect as champion was popping television ratings. His matches on Raw were usually beat by Nitro and often didn't rise above other wrestlers' matches on the same show.

That should not have been enough to cause the WWF to take the belt from him. Arguably, Michaels was the most successful U.S. drawing card in ten years, since Hogan's peak days. But three things were happening that led to the belt being taken off Michaels—with no plans for it to be given back to him for any length of time.

First, Bret Hart was returning. The intense bidding war for Bret's services led to an inflated perception of Bret's drawing power. Given the price the WWF had to pay Bret, he *had* to be their franchise champion. Bret, at 39, had fewer years left on top and those years had to be seized right away given his salary. So the stage was set for Bret to win the title back at Wrestlemania.

Second, Michaels's character began to stray off the tracks. Perhaps in reaction to the non-pretty boy NWO leaders or because Bret Hart returned or because Michaels's act was getting stale in some people's eyes, crowds began to boo him. While women still screamed for him, men began to tire of his stripping routine, his pandering to fans, and his underdog persona.

Third, Michaels was breaking down personally. Michaels took on an inhumane schedule of house show dates and promotional appearances. He kept himself in remarkably good shape, which wrestling his style of match virtually nightly was enough to do, but his lifestyle on the road began to take its toll. Michaels began showing signs of fatigue and stress, blowing his temper in the ring. He yelled at Vader in mid-ring for missing a spot. He responded to fans who booed him which only encouraged the hecklers. He showed signs that he was cracking.

Wrestlers who observed him on the road predicted he would self-destruct sooner than later. Vince McMahon and WWF management were aware of Michaels's problems and saw the need coming for some type of relief. Rather than build entirely around someone who was beginning to show signs of breaking down, if not outright instability, they turned toward Bret Hart. Michaels, they believed, would benefit from a relief of the pressure of carrying the WWF on his shoulders.

Michaels's title loss hit him hard in several ways. He knew, even back in the late-'80s, that he was a potential breakout star. He knew he had the looks, the body, the charisma, and the talent (as says his theme song) to be world champion. He dreamed of

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

Issue No. 182 WRESTLING WEEKLY JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION April 6, 1996

Michaels defeats Bret after 60-plus minutes

Highly anticipated main event falls short of expectations, Warrior's return met with cheers

By Steve Kister, Editor

Shawn Michaels returned Bret Hart one fall

more than two months after his

return to the ring. Michaels, who had

been absent from the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to

be a highlight of the night, was

seen as a major draw for the event.

The match, which was expected to



Michaels in a full second round to score the

win. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

was seen as a major draw for the

event. Michaels, who had not

been seen in the ring since his

departure from the WWF in 1994,

5. The Bret Hart sweepstakes

Bret could have tipped the scales of the WWF-WCW war either direction, and chose "loyalty over money"

Absence makes Bret Hart grow fonder... or something like that. Bret Hart took a personal leave of absence from the WWF after Wrestlemania. He chose to do so for a variety of reasons, some of which may have been as devilish as they were prudent. When he returned, he became the center of the hottest, most publicized free agent battle in wrestling history.

Bret Hart, to an even greater degree than Shawn Michaels, grew from an opening match wrestler to a main eventer within the confines of WWF rings. He had main evented for his father's Stampede Wrestling promotion in Calgary and had a great series of matches in Japan with the original Tiger Mask. Teaming with Jim Neidhart, he entered the WWF with a role similar to Doug Furnas & Phil Lafon. He was critically acclaimed internationally as a world class athlete, but due to both his natural style and not having worked enough in the U.S., he didn't have the outgoing charisma that was expected of someone with main event potential.

Out of determination, consistency, and staying true to his personality, he eventually broke out of the Hart Foundation tag team to become a singles wrestler. He grew to be one of few familiar, consistent, controversy-free faces in a crowd of controversy. With the end of Hulk Hogan's reign of dominance as "the man" in the WWF, Bret Hart was looked to as his replacement.

Bret became WWF Champion in 1992, in part because he was seen as someone who would show the media and fans during a time of the steroid scandals that the WWF was not built around 6-5 muscleheads. Bret handled his reign as champion just fine and drew well enough to neither be a flop nor a phenom. He did put together a string of matches which put him in the top three in the *Torch's* "MVP/Wrestler of the Year" category in 1991, '92, and '93 and the top spot in 1994. But management saw Bret as a nice, steady performer, not one who could take the WWF to a new level.

The WWF switched gears. When Shawn Michaels took a leave of absence in 1994, tag partner Diesel broke out as a potential singles star. The WWF saw more upside with Diesel than Bret and thus gave Diesel a chance to run with the ball in 1995. When Diesel failed to spark the WWF, the decision was made to give the belt to Michaels. Upon returning from his five month leave of absence Michaels stormed the WWF with a series of show-stealing performances against, among others, Razor Ramon and Jeff Jarrett.

Bret felt snubbed. He was seen by McMahon as the guy who would always be there for him when times were tough, but he wasn't given a chance to carry the promotion. First Bret lived in the shadows of Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage, then in the shadow of "the undeserving" Diesel, and now "the

immature, unproven timebomb" Shawn Michaels. Bret is not timid when it comes to what he thinks of his skills and drawing power or others' flaws in those areas. His shy, understated persona has always been real, but it has always been a touch coy, too. His tag line about being "the best ever" is evidence.

Privately Bret told friends at the end of 1995, while he was a transition champion, that he was going to quit the WWF, or at least take time off, after Wrestlemania. It was, he felt, the only way to put himself in the position of those who had been holding him back. Bret learned from his experience. He realized, as age 40 approached, that he had to make his move now. He also had seen stars reach a certain status and then have to keep the same hectic schedule as they did while climbing the ladder. To be seen as a star, you had to act like one. He was around for virtually Hogan's entire run. He saw Hogan's schedule decrease as his status grew. He saw the same happen with Savage. He saw Michaels return with new fire after his leave of absence in 1994 and a year later become management's choice to be champion.

Bret had also been the most reliable wrestler of this era, missing a few shows due to sickness, but only one or two due to other reasons. In other words, he was truly—as Vince McMahon once patronizingly described him—"a super trooper." Bret reasoned that not only did he deserve a break from the schedule and a chance to spend time with his family, but he could in the process improve his position in the industry.

Devilishly, his rivalry with Michaels behind the scenes contributed to his decision. In other words, the day Michaels won the WWF Title, he left the company to let Michaels sink or swim on his own, erasing any ambiguity of whether the WWF's string of subsequent success or failure as 1996 progressed was due to Bret or Michaels. With Diesel and Ramon leaving, Bret left Michaels with a stripped down roster with which to work.

The plan both failed and succeeded. It failed because Michaels had a great run as champion. Bret Hart put Michaels in the worst possible position because he left while the WWF was experiencing a rise in business. In fact, after Bret won the title from Diesel late in 1995, the WWF had seen jumps in buyrates and attendance figures. It almost led to some second-guessing of whether Michaels should get the belt after all. When they went with Michaels, Bret knew if business dropped Michaels would be blamed.

Even though Michaels succeeded as champ, Bret's plan succeeded because his absence made him seem more valuable than ever to the warring WWF and WCW. The WWF assumed all along Bret was a lock to return to their roster as soon as he had recharged his batteries at home with his family. WCW saw acquiring Bret as an opportunity to pound several nails into the coffin they were building for the WWF. WCW began working very hard to sign Bret away from the WWE. Bret's market value doubled from a sub-million dollar per year talent to well over a million in the five months

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

WHISTLING & WRAP-UP JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION

Bret Hart ready to "return home" to the WWF

After 10 days of fielding offers from both WWF and WCW, and considering both, Bret wants to stay in WWF

By Wade Keller, Editor

Bret Hart plans to rejoin the WWF with the intention of staying in the WWF for the rest of his career. The WWF has been successful at doing this for years.

For perspective, Bret Hart has been in the WWF for 10 years and has won the WWF Title 10 times. He has also been in the WCW for 10 years and has won the WCW Title 10 times.

One such to the WWF being offered in the WWF was the WWF Title. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times. Bret Hart has been offered the WWF Title 10 times.

6. McMahon rips into Turner

McMahon finally unleashes war of words against Turner, Hogan, and WCW, eventually filing a lawsuit

Former U.S. Senator from Minnesota Rudy Boschwitz tried to reclaim his seat in the Senate by attacking incumbent Sen. Paul Wellstone, the man who ousted him six years earlier. The ads mocked Wellstone and called him "embarrassingly liberal." Boschwitz defended the attack ads by smiling and saying the ads "had a sense of humor" and were done with a "sense of purpose."

Boschwitz lost in November in a landslide.

Vince McMahon, on Jan. 1, 1996, began the new year with fireworks. On Monday Night Raw he aired the first of a long series of "Billionaire Ted Skits." When Hulk Hogan turned heel, he went all out, revealing a lot of his thoughts that he had to keep private as a babyface. The same thing happened with McMahon and the Billionaire Ted Skits. McMahon had kept quiet on Raw as Eric Bischoff took shots at him and his company. But when he decided to let loose, boy did he ever let loose.

The skits showed decrepit takeoffs on Hulk Hogan ("The Huckster") and Randy Savage ("The Nacho Man"), sitting at a table as Billionaire Ted (a takeoff on Ted Turner) showed them clips of WWF stars. First came Diesel doing the jackknife, then Ahmed Johnson doing the Pearl River Plunge, Razor Ramon doing the Razor's Edge, and Shawn Michaels leaping off a ladder. Huckster responded, "Brother, at my age, my feet don't leave the ground."

The narrator concluded the skit: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks. The New WWF Generation—on top of the hill, not over it."

(By the end of the year, there was no shortage of irony considering Ramon and Diesel jumped to WCW and Ahmed missed several months with an injury while Hogan and Savage were healthy all year.)

Bischoff, watching the skits on live Nitro, shot back: "Desperate people do desperate things. And when you get desperate, you get beat every single time." He then gave away the finish of the pre-taped main event on Raw. Steve McMichael said: "If you want to watch the pretenders, tune into that other channel. We've got the contenders here, baby." Later, Bischoff added, "We're live, we're number one. Numbers talk, everything else walks. You know what we mean?" Bischoff appeared to be revelling in McMahon's response, seeing it as proof that all of his unanswered shots had been heard. He finally got to McMahon.

The next week the Billionaire Ted skit attacked WCW's slack steroid policy. Bischoff shot back by calling the WWF "Titanic Sports" and said the WWF was raising the price of their pay-per-views and charging fans money to have their pictures taken with the WWF Title belt. Bischoff referred to the Billionaire Ted skit, saying, "I got a kick out of

that," McMahon said, "They have a bunch of has-beens and so-sos."

(There was no shortage of irony in those Jan. 8 comments, either. Later in '96 the WWF scaled back their steroid and drug tests dramatically and WCW raised the price of their pay-per-views.)

The Jan. 15 Raw featured the third straight week of Billionaire Ted skits. Meanwhile, WCW fell eerily silent. The first two weeks Raw edged Nitro in the ratings battle (2.6 to 2.5, 3.0 to 2.8), but the third week WCW stunned the WWF with a 3.5 to 2.4 defeat.

The eerie silence by WCW was followed by a letter dated Jan. 23 responding to the WWF, asserting that the Billionaire Ted skits had "become defamatory and disparaging to WCW and its wrestlers." The WWF responded by citing what they believed were "defamatory and disparaging" comments made by WCW on television and on their 900 line. The WWF promised to file a complaint with the FTC over WCW's and Ted Turner's competitive business practices. They bought ad space in the *New York Times* business section headlined: "Attention Stockholders: Time-Warner Beware." The ad said "Ted Turner has lost \$40 million of YOUR money in his personal vendetta against the WWF." McMahon wanted to put pressure on Turner to lighten up in his approach to competing with the WWF—or, as McMahon believed—attempting to put him out of business.

Meanwhile, the Feb. 3 TORCH broke the news first nationally that WCW had sent feelers out to several top WWF names offering big money to give their notice to the WWF and sign with them. Two weeks later, in a TORCH cover story featuring an interview with Vince McMahon, McMahon acknowledged that WCW had made a \$750,000 per year offer to Kevin Nash to jump. Two weeks later Scott Hall gave his notice.

"The interference with many of our performers tends to create lousy morale," McMahon said. "TBS has engaged in a systematic plan, implemented by a series of steps, to destroy the WWF in order that TBS might achieve a monopoly over the professional wrestling business."

McMahon explained his strategy in airing the Billionaire Ted Skits. "We laid back as long as we could," he said. "We waited until January before responding. We're trying to tell our story in an entertaining light. The world thinks the WWF is this big-huge deal and WCW is whatever it is. If WCW was competing on some equal basis, great. But Turner is competing unfairly. I have to concentrate on making these points through humor... So we're trying to entertain while at the same time telling a story."

Like former Sen. Rudy Boschwitz, McMahon lost that battle in a landslide. His Billionaire Ted skits backfired. When Hall and Nash debuted on Nitro, they used the Billionaire Ted skits to their advantage, acknowledging them during their first WCW interviews, adding to the impression that Hall and Nash were anti-WCW. At first it gave the

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

WWE contends TBS trying to destroy them

Titan Sports files formal complaint with FTC, McMahon tells why he is concerned

By Vince McMahon
The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

The Titan Sports Group is a company that has been in the business of professional wrestling for over 20 years. It is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). The WWF is a company that has been successful in the past, but it is a company that is now facing a new challenge from the Titan Sports Group. The Titan Sports Group is now facing a new challenge from the World Wrestling Federation (WWF).

ECW strengthens the core of its roster, yet with drop of world class mid-card workers, relies on brawling

ECW lost some big names wrestlers during 1996 despite their growth. The last card of 1995 for ECW in Queens, N.Y. included the now departed Too Cold Scorpio, Public Enemy, and Cactus Jack. But, the stability of the roster overwhelmed the departures. ECW solidified a core group of wrestlers who appeared, at the end of the year, to be staying with ECW for the long haul, wherever it took them. The Gangstas, Sabu, Sandman, Raven, Buh Buh Ray Dudley, Tommy Dreamer, The Eliminators,

At the end of 1996, ECW's Paul Heyman knew he had to enter the pay-per-view market. He told his wrestlers for a couple of years that pay-per-view was coming. Without a set date for the event, he might start losing the faith and patience of even those who seemed to be the most loyal members of his locker room.

For Wade Keller's daily news updates call the Pro Wrestling Torch Hotline • 1-800-251-1000 • 5¢ Cents Per Minute

As 1997 began, ECW had cut back on risky and unnecessary brawling in the crowd, had cut back on excessive blading, had added strength to the middle of the card again with a Michinoku Pro working agreement, and was zeroed in on drawing a buyrate that would bring Viewer's Choice back on their side. With the WWF in ECW's corner, to one extent or another, they appear to have a better than 50 percent shot at running several pay-per-views in 1997.

WWF undergoes major turnover in its roster, loses Hall, Nash, Bret; gets mixed results from replacements

Explicably, the WWF gave the charismatic, outgoing Austin a generic, drab, straight-from-the-can gimmick called "Ringmaster" and paired him with the paycheck collecting, but otherwise bored wrestling Ted DiBiase. Austin went nowhere. Then DiBiase jumped to WCW and that gave Austin a chance to show the WWF what he could do. Freed from the "Ringmaster" gimmick and with a new, cool moniker "Stone Cold," Austin began fulfilling his potential. If there has ever been a reason to question the oft-sighted "genius" of Vince McMahon and the smooth-running WWF machine that is supposed to be able to make stars out of otherwise average talents, it was giving Austin a manager to speak for him. Austin's mic work in ECW should have told the WWF they had themselves one of the best talkers in the industry. Instead, they barely let him talk during his first several months in the WWF. Once he started talking and once his Stone Cold persona was given some television time to develop

Vader was the only bonafide, accredited, proven main event-draw the WWF added in 1996 and had use of for all twelve months. One of wrestling's big unsolved mysteries remains why McMahon had Vader do a series of thirty or so jobs during his first fifty-some matches in the WWF, including one and two minute jobs to Ultimate Warrior in main events around the country. Vader gained weight, lost

competitor with WCW's deep roster.



9. WCW Cruiserweights emerge

Despite some early WCW mistakes, Dean Malenko and Rey Mysterio Jr. make the new division fool proof

The light-heavyweight division hadn't worked, and more importantly hasn't been given a chance to work, in the United States in the modern era. For such a division to draw money, one of two things would have to happen. Either (a) everything would have to be done exactly right to get past all of the paradigms and prejudices against smaller wrestlers held by promoters, fans, and bigger wrestlers; or (b) Rey Mysterio Jr. and Dean Malenko would have to be part of it.

In WCW's case, they didn't do everything exactly right, but because the remarkable athletes of Rey Jr. and Malenko were part of it, it had a foundation solid enough to avoid some early mistakes. Malenko is among the best and most credible mat workers in the sport. Rey Jr. is among the most spectacular and innovative fliers in history. When wrestling each other or wrestling others, they gave credibility to the division. Too many times in the past, attempts at other "light-heavyweight" or "junior-heavyweight" divisions failed because the champions were merely jobbers, such as Denny Brown, Steve Regal, Buck Zumhoff, or Nelson Royal. Rey Jr. and Malenko brought skills to the table, on two different ends of the spectrum, that stood out from the heavyweights.

Rey Jr. was used poorly at the start and since then from time to time, doing jobs too early and wrestling foes so big they shed light on Rey Jr.'s immensely small relative stature. The supertalents Juventud Guerrera and Psicosis have yet to be used well. Despite that, the division has been a pillar of Monday Nitro's success (see story #3). The success of WCW's cruiserweight division is no surprise considering they avoided most of the problems of past attempts at such a division. Two years ago, in a BBL editorial in TORCH #303, the faults of the past were listed. The following are excerpts of that BBL:

"Naming the division 'light-heavyweight' might be a bad start. A better name might be 'cruiserweight,' a la boxing, a name without the stigma that 'light' has in pro wrestling. Many wrestlers don't want to be dubbed a 'light-weight' wrestler, but might not mind a 'cruiserweight' title or a similar substitute. That alone is half the battle. Wrestlers have historically been reluctant to be labeled light weight because it virtually eliminates them from serious consideration as a title holder in the heavyweight division. Ricky Steamboat, for instance, never competed as a 'light-heavyweight' despite being smaller than many wrestlers who are classified 'light heavyweights.'"

In WCW, wrestlers didn't run from the division. Obviously Rey Jr. wouldn't run from the division because he wouldn't have a place in the U.S. scene without such a division, but Malenko might have in the past, not wanting to be grouped in a separate category from his bigger colleagues.

"The champion needs to be treated with more respect than champions of the past. Long time NWA light heavyweight champion Denny Brown wore his belt to the ring before doing a job to mid-level heavyweights. The champion, whomever it is, needs not only to be treated with respect, but be worthy of that respect. The title should never be defended against jobbers, either. The title should be paid the same or nearly the same reverence as the world heavyweight title."

WCW never placed the cruiserweight champ in a position of being a jobber, although Psicosis was treated like a jobber at times. And Rey Jr. and Malenko were worthy of respect and thus brought respect to the title. While the cruiserweight title wasn't paid nearly the reverence of the heavyweight title, it was never treated as a second class belt for inferior athletes and the strengths of the competitors were always stressed.

"The division should not suffer as it has in the past by having only two or three mainstays. One key reason the lighter weight divisions work in Japan is that there are dozens of established names in the divisions. The last thing WCW needs is another belt that means nothing. If the title ends up being a trophy that two wrestlers fight over month after month, the division is a waste of time."

Certainly the focus of the division was Malenko and Rey Jr., but Juventud, Psicosis, and Mr. J.L. were among many wrestlers used full or part time as part of the division. Perhaps the best wrestler in the world in 1996, Ultimo Dragon, was the centerpiece of the division for a stretch in '96 and plans to be in WCW full time in '97, giving the cruiserweight division three mainstays who are among the top 10 or 20 workers in the world.

"The division does have an advantage of the heavyweight division in that it can survive without traditional wrestling angles. The feuds in the light-heavyweight division can survive based on the premise of two wrestlers wanting to see who really is the better wrestler, a refreshing break from the endless series of rehashed angles that lead to most feuds. While angles should not be eliminated entirely from the division, athleticism and bragging rights to being 'the better wrestlers' should be stressed more in lighter weight divisions."

WCW promoted a few angles around the division (Malenko stealing Rey Jr.'s mask), but it was a backdrop for the main reason fans were into the division, that being athleticism. People really did want to watch two great athletes compete to see who was "better that given night." You don't see that very often in the heavyweight division.

"It's likely someone will go out of their way to sabotage the division. Of course, the sabotage will be disguised with a rationale that states, 'It's best for the company if these guys don't show-up the heavyweights.' Hulk Hogan would have to work harder in the ring and actually fight a somewhat talented opponent in order for him to not be totally outshined in many fans' eyes by the light-heavyweight title match that would take place earlier in the card."

While Hogan probably dropped a few hints here

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

WRESTLING'S WEEKLY JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION
June 22, 1996

Great American Bash exceeds expectations

Mongo joins Horsem; Bischoff jackedknifed by Nash; Rey Jr. debuts; Nitro smashes Raw

By Steve Kater, Editor
A successful state in wrestling circles within the world for nearly 30 years, the Great American Bash was a success in many ways.

Chris Benoit, who never seemed to actually enjoy the name "The Great American Bash," was the star of the show. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Rey Mysterio Jr. made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Dean Malenko made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Steve Regal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Buck Zumhoff made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Nelson Royal made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

Denny Brown made his debut in the main event of the Bash, and he was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash. He was the only wrestler to win the main event of the Bash.

10. UFC hurt by media scrutiny

Buyrates drop as UFC struggles to legitimize itself, while striking overtakes Gracie submission style

One year ago, the number eight story of the year was "UFC grows despite media." This year, the headline is the opposite. In last year's article on UFC, it cited three main reasons UFC succeeded despite the better part of this century declarations from those in the pro wrestling industry that "real pro wrestling" would never succeed: "(1) If it wasn't worked, people would get seriously hurt and it would turn off the general public. (2) There's not enough money in the competition to make each fighter risk his reputation. (3) Most of the matches would become boring stalemates, which was the original reason pro wrestling became a worked sport."

In 1996, once again, no one was seriously hurt in a major league hybrid fight (UFC or EFC). Sure, there was some blood, but boxers, hockey players, and even basketball players bleed during games. Despite the stellar track record, the media and politicians attacked UFC for being too dangerous.

Because hybrid fighting faced so much political scrutiny, especially in their ill-fated attempts to become legitimized in New York, they were unable to direct their attention toward promoting the sport on a large scale.

That contributed to decreasing buyrates. UFC averaged around a 1.0 percent buyrate for each of their four events in 1995, but saw buyrates drop to 0.9 at the start of 1996 all the way to 0.5 and lower at the end of the year. UFC's competitor, EFC, didn't crack 0.2 for either of its events and despite a credible roster of world class fighters, was unable to shed the minor league image compared to UFC.

The drop in UFC's buyrates has to be attributed to more than just politicians blindly firing at the easy target UFC had become. It also had to do with the inconsistent quality of the events and lack of improvement in the entertainment and production aspects of the programs.

The NFL is able to survive several-year-long streaks of boring SuperBowls for a variety of factors, none of which UFC shares. The reporters covering the NFL are generally fans of football, the NFL is part of the fabric of American society, and the NFL is the talk of conversation among most Americans, all of which leads to it being simply accepted that the NFL is legitimate. Per player, per minute on the field, there were more serious knee, head, back, arm, shoulder, and neck injuries in football than in UFC. The only injuries that occur more often in UFC than in football are hand injuries—because UFC inherently is designed to punish the offensive player more than the defensive player by not protecting the hand against the rock-hard head. In UFC, when a fighter gets knocked out, usually it happens quickly due to a mismatch, a misstep, or in Tank Abbott's case, a slip-up. But after being pummelled for all of a few seconds (as opposed to ten rounds as in boxing), the fight is over. In UFC, the rules are not

designed to prolong the inevitable, to punish the inferior competitor by making him "finish the final eight rounds" or "finish the final three quarters" of a contest. That suddenness of finishes leads to two problems for UFC. Viewers don't get to see as much action as in other sports and politicians and reporters, wholly unfamiliar and uneducated, see short fights and react in a knee-jerk fashion to the "brutality."

So politicians and reporters write about banning the sport because it's "too brutal" while many potential fans of hybrid fighting turn away from the sport because it doesn't live up to its hype.

The fight in Detroit between UFC officials, politicians, and media was more interesting than the much hyped main event that culminated on May 17 between Dan Severn and Ken Shamrock. Severn and Shamrock barely touched, cautiously circling each other for the vast majority of the 30 minutes. Severn, by showing a bit more initiative, won via a 2-1 judge's decision. Although Don Frye beating Amuary Bittetti in the semi-main event was a good fight, the 30 minute staredown overshadowed it.

But the marquee value of that fight should have led to a higher buyrate than 0.6, down from 0.7 and 0.9 for the previous two events. But the two previous events ended with weak main events for two different reasons. The Dec. 16, 1995 Ultimate Ultimate main event saw Severn beat Taktarov via judge's decision after a 30 minute draw. As fighters have learned how to prevent themselves from losing, they began to employ that strategy in big fights more so than trying to win. On the flip side, the Feb. 16 UFC tournament ended with Frye beating Gary Goodridge at 2:15. The short main events must be a letdown for the casual customer of UFC.

But perhaps the biggest change in UFC is the change in the winning style. At one time UFC seemed magical, with the small Royce Gracie using mysterious jiu jitsu techniques to take down bigger opponents and make them submit. With the rise of Don Frye and Mark Coleman, who are power strikers with wrestling backgrounds, but not slick submission artists, a lot of UFC's magic disappeared, possibly explaining a big part of the drop in buyrates.

What appeared in 1995 to be the sport of the future turned into a possible passing fad by the beginning of 1997. It didn't help UFC that its core base of fans dropped while politicians used each other's past uneducated, kneejerk, ulterior-motive decisions as "precedents" for even more uneducated, kneejerk, ulterior-motive decisions.

The highest profile rip-job on UFC came Feb. 9 with Tom Jarril's story for ABC's 20/20. Sen. John McCain told ABC: "We don't let roosters engage in cock fighting. We don't allow dogs to fight pit bulls. We don't allow human beings to go out on the street and engage in this type of activity. We call it disturbing the peace. But we will sanction this in various arenas around the country? It's a sad commentary on American society."

Of course, two cars racing down the street is breaking the law, unless it's professional drivers doing so on a race course to see who's faster.

Said the clueless Sen. Roy Goodman to ABC: "The problem is, this isn't a sport. It's an animalistic

PRO WRESTLING TORCH

WRESTLING WEEKLY JOURNAL OF NEWS AND OPINION

Issue No. 105

May 21, 1996

UFC officials fighting for life in Michigan

Century old Michigan law prohibits UFC events, could threaten May 17 Cobo Hall show

HEADLINE NEWS STORY

By Bruce Geller

Ultimate Fighting Championship has recently

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

and not only that, but the UFC has been

11-50 The Rest of the Top 50

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11 Strange Pillman angle ends, jumps to WWF 12 WWF drastically drops intensity of drug tests 13 Piper returns to main event status in WCW 14 Pillman pulls a gun on Austin in extreme angle 15 Eric Bischoff joins NWO, turns heel 16 Ultimate Warrior returns to WWF, leaves 17 Sting changes character first time in career 18 Vader jobs out during early months in WWF 19 Jim Ross goes on tirade on Raw against VKM 20 Bulldog's surprise WCW jump stopped by Vince 21 Clique say goodbye to MSG, get in trouble 22 Chris Benoit emerges as main event star 23 Cactus Jack leaves ECW, becomes Mankind 24 Jerry Jarrett sells his shares of faltering USWA 25 ECW-WWF cooperate at arms length 26 Rookie Giant reigns as champ, draws ratings 27 Anticipated Severn-Shamrock match bores 28 Curt Hennig walks out on WWF to join WCW 29 Royal Rumble posts surprise high buyrate 30 AAA falls apart, loses all U.S. momentum | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 31 WWF weekly PPV idea rebuffed by cable TV 32 Wrestler Mark Coleman dominates UFC 33 Jake Roberts returns as worker and booker 34 WWF follows WCW, brings in lucha wrestlers 35 World Peace Festival flops in Los Angeles 36 Raven reigns as ECW Champ most of year 37 Aggressive syndication of AWF ends quickly 38 Dick Murdoch dies at age 49 39 Ray Stevens dies at age 61 40 WWF experiments with live talk show on USA 41 New Jack confronts Pillman for real at Arena 42 Dillon blindsides McMahon with resignation 43 Ahmed Johnson injured, misses end of year 44 Goldust gimmick toned down, turned face 45 Uncensored II somehow worse than first 46 Don Frye wins weakened Ultimate Ultimate 47 UWF promoter Herb Abrams' bizarre death 48 Hogan pursues extortion lawsuit 49 Gene Okerlund sits out, re-signed by WCW 50 Lawler admits wrestling fixed to avoid taxes |
|--|--|

Trying to explain Brian Pillman's year to someone who wasn't around to experience it is much like trying to explain to a blind person what a sunrise looks like. You sort of had to be there to experience it. Pillman began the year with a bizarre angle with WCW booker Kevin Sullivan. The idea was to make it appear that the feud between Pillman and his boss Sullivan got out of hand. Eric Bischoff played along, upsetting a lot of wrestlers that their two bosses were trying to play them for fools. Then Pillman was "fired" by Bischoff for his conduct and Pillman showed up at ECW Arena, calling Bischoff a "jerkoff" and threatening to "pill out his Johnson" and "piss in the middle of the ring." Later Pillman would get into an apparently real-life confrontation with New Jack. In order to "sell" the idea that Pillman was really fired, WCW paid him to sit at home for several months. When Pillman's contract ran out, he decided to test his value to the WWF. In the mean time, he rolled his hum-vee vehicle and suffered numerous injuries, most seriously breaking one of his ankles. Left a virtual cripple, he still managed to sign a huge guaranteed deal with the WWF. By the beginning of 1997, Pillman had yet to wrestle a match for the WWF, but was part of the most bizarre angle of the year when he pulled a gun on Steve Austin in a live skit on Raw. He has a chance to be a breakout star in 1997, but no matter what happens the rest of his career, 1996 will be his most memorable... WCW takes full advantage of Piper's name value and history with Hulk Hogan... After the departure of appointed drug czar J.J. Dillon, the WWF drops its strict drug testing policy, cutting back on the frequency of their testing because, they said, drug use levels had gotten so low such comprehensive testing was redundant and expensive... The gun angle on Raw showed how desperate the WWF was to hotshot a big rating after losing to Nitro so many weeks in a row... Bischoff moved from TV announcer to TV character, and turned his abrasive heel personality into a valuable asset of the NWO... Ultimate Warrior, once the top draw in the United States, appeared to help the WWF pop two good buyrates at the start of the year and headlined some of the best rated Raws of the year, but he and Vince McMahon could not see eye to eye on business and again he left in a cloud of controversy. He missed house shows and blamed it on the death of his father even though the timelines didn't match. His days in the industry, once again, appear to be done... WCW's most consistent personality, Sting, radically changed, at first into a boring non-character but by the end of the year was a legitimate ratings draw. He revitalized his career without wrestling one match. Will have major impact in 1997... In 1995 Vader was a bigger star than Scott Hall. Then they

switched promotions and McMahon virtually killed Vader's drawing power... As the only way to save face with the "new" Diesel and "new" Razor Ramon debacle, Jim Ross took the bullet for the WWF by going on a memorable tirade against McMahon. Ross's character returned to that of a credible announcer by the end of the year... Bischoff tried to embarrass the WWF again by covertly acquiring Bulldog. McMahon stopped it just in time... By celebrating their departure in mid-ring at MSG, Hall and Nash angered McMahon. Hunter took the brunt of the punishment afterward... Chris Benoit became a legitimate star in the U.S. to match his in-ring skills... Mankind, another example of McMahon thinking of merchandising, ahead of three-dimensional character development?... One of wrestling's last territory promoters bows out... ECW-WWF test the waters for '97... Giant becomes WCW's biggest new star... UFC hurt more than Shamrock or Severn... Curt Hennig joins list of former WWF loyalists to jump to WCW... Rumble jump-starts successful year for WWF... After great gates in L.A. in past years, politics in Mexico and poor business planning kills U.S. momentum for AAA... WWF looks to radical concepts for alternative sources for revenue... Mark Coleman appears unstoppable as 1997 begins... Jake Roberts returns to national spotlight, but behind the scenes is where his future lies... AAA-WWF relationship ineffective in '96, but may grow in '97... U.S. looks at international festival differently than Japan has to similar mixed shows... Raven becomes centerpiece of character-based ECW... AWF tries to attract old time fans with old time style program. Never turns a profit despite great syndicated exposure... Dick Murdoch dies at too young an age... Ray Stevens, one of all time great workers, passes... Live Wire fails to live up to expectations... New Jack stirred controversy even before Eric Kulas incident almost cost ECW its pay-per-view chances... J.J. Dillon leaves WWF, fired of being "McMahon lucky," jumps to WCW... When WWF needed to establish next big star, Ahmed Johnson sat out with medical problems... Controversial Goldust gimmick toned down by McMahon so much, it became impotent... Can WCW reverse Uncensored trend in 1997?... Don Frye, top fighter or evidence of weaker UFC field?... Hogan's extortion lawsuit could become media circus in '97... Longtime master interviewer Gene Okerlund sits out with contract dispute before returning to WCW few months later... Lawler shows he'll "break principle" and risk being labelled a hypocrite by "breaking kayfabe" to save a few bucks. Needed to "expose" wrestling in order to run vital, profitable casino shows important for USWA survival...

Pro Wrestling Torch

1996 AWARDS

The following pages feature the results of the ninth annual Pro Wrestling Torch Awards poll. The results were compiled from hundreds of ballots from Torch readers across the world. A first place vote in the primary 14 categories received three points, a second place vote two points, and a third place vote one point. The secondary awards were compiled via first place votes only. The percentage of the total number of points received is next to each of the top five finishers. Positions 6-10 are also listed followed by a list of the top three winners in past years' polls. Readers' randomly selected comments on each of the primary awards are published followed by Torch columnist and editor's picks.

I. American MVP

Shawn Michaels

READERS' AWARD COMMENTS

Dennis Christmas: Steve Austin. He has taken advantage of the opportunity given to him in the WWF, and has risen to prominence. An explosive personality behind the mic, and an excellent worker in the ring. Austin is a vital part of the WWF, and should be for years to come. I'm sure Bischoff is kicking himself for letting him go. Rey Misterio Jr. At 5-4, 140 Rey is absolutely sensational. It took a while, but all fans have become appreciative of his high flying ability and amazing moves. A true credit to WCW. Shawn Michaels. Yes, some people got tired of his flamboyant boy toy act, but Michaels worked hard and did great as a WWF champion.

Terri Smith: There can only be one logical choice for the American MVP award this year—Shawn Michaels. Shawn had to carry the WWF franchise on his back. While Bret "Crybaby" Hart was off partying month after month, Shawn gave entertaining performances. His schedule was demanding but he still did what was required in order to improve the WWF and bring outside press to wrestling in a positive way. Vince McMahon is being very self-destructive in giving the belt back to Bret at Wrestlemania. People are sick of Bret. Shawn has a natural sense of humor and a quick wit which is always entertaining. Shawn is a true professional and I'm tired of the unfair criticism he gets.

Mark Black: Shawn Michaels proved he is the American MVP by having consistently great PPV matches against Vader, Mankind, Bulldog. He even carried Sid to a good match. Steve

Austin proves he's very valuable to the heel side because of his badass attitude and interviews.

Chris Heil: Shawn Michaels. Let's face it. His in and out of ring personality sucks, but he can work, carry just about anyone in a main event match, do good interviews, and carry a promotion.

Howie Crumit: With Bret's hiatus, Ahmed's injury, Warrior's departure, and the losses of Hall and Nash, Shawn Michaels was the only top star the WWF had for the full year. From winning the Royal Rumble to winning the title from Hart to defending it against Nash, Smith, Vader, and Mankind in four star classics, he did it all in 1996.

Harry Simon: '96 was the year of Shawn Michaels. Simply put, nobody else had such a consistent record of four-star matches. Bret Hart gets second for being the hottest free agent in the history of the sport. The Giant gets third for being so good so young.

Mark Morrone: Bret turned the WWF back on track with his return at Survivor Series while Austin's antics kept the WWF fresh all year around and Sid's comeback and title victory rejuvenated the WWF Title.

Tim Cobb: Shawn Michaels is not my favorite wrestler, but has shown work ethic, charisma, and has carried the WWF through the dark days of '96. Steve Austin and Dean Malenko also deserve recognition as two heels who have been cheered by the fans due to their work ethic.



I. American MVP

Brian Keenan: Who else could it be but Shawn Michaels? He had four-star PPV main events with six different opponents. Steve Austin's work is on a level above anyone else and he should be given a belt.

David Frey: Rey Misterio Jr. For the purists, he is the best addition of the year for WCW. The only reason to tune in to the first hour of Nitro was to see Rey Jr. vs. anyone.

Robert O'Connor: 1996 was far from the perfect year for Shawn Michaels, but he still produced some very good matches, most notably the Diesel and Mankind brawls. He's still the most over babyface in North America, Survivor Series notwithstanding. His frequent displays of unprofessionalism were rather troublesome, though. Kevin Nash gets second. He had a strong final run in the WWF and he is probably the main reason the NWO is so over. Rey Misterio Jr. gets third for being the highlight of every WCW pay-per-view he was on.

Chris Cressman: 1996 was Shawn Michaels's year. His workrate and interviews were the best of his career. He worked his butt off every night, and the proof is when he got a watchable main event match out of no-sell Sid.

Shannon Steward: Rey Misterio Jr. was in many four-to-five star matches. Sabu is the most consistently great worker in the U.S. Michaels continues to be great.

Laurie Webber: Shawn Michaels has worked more than any other superstar, and he earned every penny he got.

Bryan Meyers: Shawn Michaels had the best matches this year on PPV. He was the focus of the WWF all year and did a good job of carrying the league. Even though his push was distorted by Warrior, Sid, and Hart, he still maintained the image that he was no. 1 in the league. Warrior gets the second pick. Even though he only stayed a few months, buyrate, ratings, and attendance jumped. His return was the most talked about wrestling story by the general public. Hall & Nash, when they jumped to WCW and formed the NWO, gave Nitro a boost in ratings and it never lost to Raw again for the rest of the year.

Fareed Barash: Shawn Michaels is a great charismatic, worker who carried the WWF for six months. Steve Austin is not only a great worker, but the absolute best interview in the business. Raven gets third. He is a superstar who needs to be more appreciated by people in the press, promoters, and fans. He is a great brawler and a fantastic main event wrestler for ECW.

Jason Smith: Steve Austin had a breakout year, developing the hottest gimmick in wrestling. Chris Jericho displayed phenomenal all-around skills, while trying to bring a new level of excitement to the ring. Eddie Guerrero, week after week, showed

1. Shawn Michaels (35%)
2. Steve Austin (22%)
3. Rey Misterio Jr. (16%)
4. Chris Benoit (12%)
5. Bret Hart (10%)

6-10) Dean Malenko, The Giant,
Kevin Nash, Shane Douglas, Raven

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Michaels, Bret, E. Guerrero

1994: Bret, Ric Flair, Michaels

1993: Vader, Flair, Bret

1992: Flair, Rick Rude, Bret

1991: Flair, Bret, Cactus Jack

1990: Flair, Hulk Hogan, Sting

1989: Flair, Terry Funk, Lex Luger

1988: Flair, DiBiase, Randy Savage

incredible workrate and shined as U.S. Champion.

Steve Watson: Shawn Michaels was a joy to watch and made PPVs and house shows exciting throughout the year. He truly exemplified the "new generations" of champions and is my MVP pick for the second year in a row. Chris Benoit played his role with the Horsemen well and proved he could have great brawling matches as well as great high-flying matches. Benoit was great on interviews and matches and was the highlight of WCW in 1996. Sting came out as a major player in WCW against the NWO on interviews and in matches until his weird turn in September.

Annette Boyer: Despite his critics and the pressure of being the top dog in the WWF, 1996 was a strong year for Shawn Michaels. He carried the pay-per-views with must-see main events and proved his worth as champion. Steve Austin had a solid year and all signs point toward a Stone Cold 1997. Chris Benoit won fans over with his intensity and work ethic and thus merits third.

Pat Radice: Steve Austin and Chris Benoit both started slowly in 1996, but both finished great. Austin gets the number one spot because of his mic work and matches with Mero and Bret.

Pete Houston: Without question Shawn Michaels is the wrestler of the year. In '96 he has shown the world what he is capable of. He has fan appeal, acrobatics, technical skills, and he just kicks ass. Even though he was a face in 1996, he looks and acts more natural as a heel. Toward the end of the year he turned more tweener. I can't wait for the feud of the '90s, Michaels vs. Bret. I respect Bret Hart for coming back to the WWF. I respect his wrestling skills and loyalty. Steve Austin is the best new heel in wrestling. Whenever he talks, you want to listen because he is so damn

hilarious. He is a skilled brawler and technician.

Rob Mansfield: Shawn Michaels carried Vader, Mankind, and Sid through all of their matches and had a stellar match with Bret at Wrestlemania XII. He is charismatic and a splendid athlete and will carry the WWF into the future. Sid defeated the two icons in the WWF today, Shawn and Bret, and had credibility in doing so. He has a huge fan following and may not carry the transitional champion identity forever. Bret was phenomenal at Wrestlemania and Survivor Series against Austin.

Eric Krol: Shawn Michaels is the most valuable because he kept the WWF afloat. The Hart bidding war showed how valuable he is. Austin became the best heel in the business this year. Ironically, WCW has been way more exciting all-around, but it's more of a group effort.

Ken Nataner: Steve Austin kicked ass this year. He finally showed his potential as a major heel.

Bill DeRosier: Shawn Michaels could carry anyone to a good match. He's the best worker in ten years. Sabu is the most exciting wrestler in the world. Steve Austin is the next big superstar in wrestling.

Jeffrey Cohen: Bret Hart proved that one man can indeed dictate the fates of two promotions. Shawn Michaels performed to the best of his abilities, and was rewarded by having to put over one of the worst wrestlers in the WWF. Ric Flair lost the latter part of the year to surgery, but his presence—and occasional lack of presence—was still a major story in WCW.

Greg Casterioto: Shawn Michaels, without a doubt, proved he is The Man in wrestling. He puts forth 110 percent not just at PPVs, but at house shows, also. Lex Luger carried WCW "top names" this year almost by himself. Hogan never wrestled on TV. Sting stopped wrestling the last quarter of the year. Randy Savage was gone for the last two months. And The Outsiders never wrestle. Luger wrestled on about every TV show this year. That's usually not a big thing, but in WCW it's saying something. Back to the Outsiders. They may have never wrestled, but their presence was enough for the ratings to go through the roof.

Ted Bauer: Shawn Michaels, for the second year in a row, was the dominant presence in American pro wrestling. He carried the WWF from April until November, stealing the spotlight with matches against Hart, Nash, Vader, Mankind, and Bulldog, all of which were "match of the year" candidates. Despite the fan reaction he received in New York at Survivor Series, Michaels still was the Best of the Best in 1996. Number two goes begrudgingly to Hulk Hogan. To his credit, he did finally become as "cool" as he wanted to be in the 1980s with his heel persona. However, this award points more to the fact that without the NWO, one of the Big Two promotions would have been nothing, and without Hogan, the NWO would have been nothing. In controlling WCW, though, he placed a muzzle on Nash and Hall and they could have contended for

I. American MVP

this award if not for Hogan. A surprise no. 3 goes to Steve Richards, the break-out character of the year in wrestling. Hysterical when he did anything, he is poised to become a main eventer in 1997.

Jason Williams: Shawn Michaels earns this award because he worked his ass off the entire year. He basically did all this year. He won the Royal Rumble, won the world title, and was involved in the best WWF matches this year. He continues to have fantastic interviews and an amazing workrate, whether it be at house show or pay-per-views. Michaels probably owes a lot his success to trying to outdo Bret Hart, which he was successful at.

Dave Moore: With all due respect to the overrated Ric Flair, he was too busy playing clown in Bischoff's circus, which leaves Shane Douglas to be the best.

Jim Zordani: Rey Mysterio Jr. hardly ever disappointed me with his performances in ECW and WCW. Rey's bout with Juventud Guerrera in March from ECW Arena made me a lucha fan for life. Mysterio Jr. showed in WCW that he could have terrific matches with not just lucha stars. Shawn Michaels carried the WWF on his back during 1996. He had unbelievable bouts with Diesel, Mankind, and Davey Boy Smith, and very good matches with Bret Hart and Vader this past year. The man even carried Sid to an above average bout, something I thought impossible. Steve Austin started out slow in the WWF early in the year after arriving from ECW. Blame it on ring rust, a lame gimmick, or poor opponents. But once the Ringmaster became Stone Cold, we saw the emergence of a superstar. His work against Savio Vega and Bret Hart was terrific. Austin is the wrestler to watch in 1997.

Tom Ferreira: Maybe it's the current trend to be vulgar and obnoxious in wrestling, but Steve Austin pulls it off because he's one of the best workers in the business. He's just what the WWF needed to offset all the losses—a heel with solid heat and a rabid fan base. In 1997 Austin will become the top star in wrestling... and that's the bottom line.

Greg Caster: After the WWF-WCW bidding war, it seemed that Bret was the most valuable wrestler of '96. However, he just wasn't active enough this year, so he gets second. The first spot goes to Shawn Michaels for keeping the WWF afloat as champion this year. Number three goes to Giant. In a year when every major WCW star appeared to be suffering from multiple personality disorders, Giant remained one of the few constants and was over as champion and as a member of the NWO.

Patrick McNeill: The WWF imploded after Wrestlemania without Bret, and became interesting again when he returned in November. He gives the WWF their "major league" look. The Giant was the focal point of WCW on the heel side and he will be on the face side in '97. If he expands his repertoire,

he will be the best big man ever. The Franchise, Shane Douglas, is the glue that holds together ECW, the promotion for the broken tables and barbed wire crowd.

Mike McCullough: Shawn Michaels was forced to carry the entire WWF on every pay-per-view while he was heavyweight champ, and put on the best performances in each one. Despite his recent "problems" with fan reactions, the name of the show is still wrestling and Michaels still does it well.

D. Scott Bergantz: Chris Benoit is hot. His wrestling ability is superb, his current program is interesting, and his wrestling interviews have progressed by leaps and bounds. Benoit comes across intense, yet subtle. Maybe some of Arn Anderson's technique has rubbed off on "The Crippler" because at this stage they both have similar styles.

Daren Sparks: My first pick is Sting. He has been rejuvenated by his new character and is still the most charismatic, hardest worker in the world.

Chris Kelly: Shawn Michaels is a great worker and always has the best match on every WWF pay-per-view. Steve Austin made the WWF so much more interesting and Dean Malenko wrestled in some of the best matches of the year.

E. Sayers: Shawn Michaels worked really hard and got guys like Sid and Mankind to have great matches. He helped get Sid over and is a good team player.

Kevin Perry: Shawn Michaels is the wrestler of the year because he had a great match vs. Bret Hart, and carried Sid and Vader to good matches.

Dylan Hayes: This goes to Steve Austin hands down. He is by far the most over heel since Roddy Piper in the mid-'80s. Great worker who fits his persona to a tee. Benoit is definitely the best in WCW this year. Old HBK slips to no. 3 after a no. 1 first half of '96. He slipped partially because of his performances against Vader and Goldust. Honorable mention to Taz, Dean Malenko, Rey Jr., and Shane Douglas.

Robb McMahon: Shawn Michaels carried the WWF for the first seven months. His performances against Owen Hart and Diesel in the first quarter of the year were remarkable. Shane Douglas carries ECW and is truly the Franchise.

Seth F. Berger: An MVP should be somebody who has captivated the pro wrestling fan inside the ring as well as out of it, which leaves three possibilities. Bret Hart doesn't qualify because of his eight month absence. Steve Austin won't work due to his being in relative obscurity the first six months. The only one who has kept the community on edge all year is Shawn Michaels. I don't purchase PPVs only because of him, but I'm assured of a top quality match every time he shows up on screen. Second and third go to Scott Hall and

Kevin Nash, mainly because the WWF hierarchy themselves knew they screwed up by letting them go; just go back to the failed Razor and Diesel clones to see that those young kids don't have the power of camera manipulation in hand, unlike the originals.

Rasche Brown: Dean Malenko is the definition of wrestler. He can wrestle almost any style, heel or tweener, which is good for any franchise.

Doug Gruener: Dean Malenko is my choice for American MVP. Malenko had consistently excellent matches throughout 1996 especially with Rey Mysterio Jr. and Ultimo Dragon. Without him, WCW's cruiserweight division would have been a puzzle missing its most important piece. I think Shawn Michaels deserves second place. Although he lost a lot of popularity after "losing his edge," his matches with Bret Hart, Steve Austin, Vader, Mankind, British Bulldog, and Diesel cannot be ignored. I placed Rey Jr. at no. 3 because he was also an integral part of the cruiserweight division's success, which was one of the most positive aspects of wrestling this year.

Eric Nelson: Shawn Michaels is an obvious pick. Austin comes in second for finally breaking out, getting pissed, and making people pay attention. The gun scene didn't hurt that. Benoit is my third pick because he makes me want to watch.

Chris Palmatier: I hate Shawn Michaels, but he carried the WWF with Bret Hart and Kevin Nash were gone. He carried Sid to a good match.

Frank Van Alstine: Steve Austin made a great comeback in 1996. Good workrate and even better mic skills. When I attended a house show in Milwaukee, Austin got on the mic and said, "Milwaukee, I am your new leader." The only question I have is where do I sign up? Because of Austin, the phrase "whoop ass" is now part of my everyday vocabulary.

Kimberly Redin: Even though he's no longer the champion, Shawn carried the WWF all year. I think signs of stress began to show at the end of the year, though.

Carlie Gill: Shawn Michaels, easily. He had a great match on every pay-per-view and kept the WWF house show attendance solid after getting the belt. Scott Hall comes in second. He simply walked on to Nitro and changed the balance of power in the Monday Night Wars. That's valuable. Steve Austin is number three for giving the WWF a credible, hot heel after McMahon fumbled so badly with Vader.

Chuck Kaye: Shawn Michaels drew at house shows and had more four star matches than any champion in recent history. Steve Austin was so damn believable that you actually respect him as a heel for his integrity. Mankind was the most unselfish tier one wrestler in a promotion.

Bob Nichnadowicz: Can you consider anyone but Shawn Michaels? An incredible amount of

I. American MVP

charisma and the ability to carry anyone to a four star match gets him the one nod here. Steve Austin was the best and only credible heel in the Big Two. I'm a big Chris Benoit fan, but didn't think he would get over as well as he has. Casual fans even know this guy has talent.

Gary Shirker: The WWF could not have survived without Shawn Michaels. He had the best match on every PPV he appeared on with the exception of Survivor Series due to his low caliber opponent. Even then he made the match watchable. Steve Austin finally gave the WWF a credible heel for the first time in a long time. Shane Douglas gave the ECW Arena fans someone to buy tickets so they could yell at.

Scott Hughes: Shawn Michaels carried his end of every match and was spectacular. Who else could be number one but Shawn?

Phil Pisano: Shawn Michaels lost some popularity at the end of the year, but he carried the WWF throughout the year. He works hard in the ring and behind the microphone and is full of charisma. If you had to show someone why you like wrestling, then you would want then to watch Shawn Michaels. Number two goes to the Giant because he was the only opponent who Hogan didn't totally kill off. Third goes to Mankind for carrying the Undertaker to some good matches and for taking the necessary bumps.

Scott Dryan: Bret Hart consistently put forth a solid effort and showed ring generalship in carrying opponents to matches well above their normal capabilities. He showed loyalty to the WWF even in the face of a bigger offer from rival WCW to jump ship. His loss of the WWF Title to Michaels at Wrestlemania created a enough of an issue between them that their rematch is eagerly awaited.

Rodet Etienne: This year Shawn Michaels showed he's the man in the WWF. Nearly all of his PPV matches were in the four star range.

Jason Martinez: Steve Austin is the MVP of '96 due to his constant activity against both the babyfaces and top heels in the WWF. He is a prime choice for a singles championship in '97.

Pat & Dan Enright: Both Rey Mysterio and Dean Malenko did a lot to help get the WCW Cruiserweight Division over as a legitimate force in WCW in 1996. Their matches together were some of the best of the year.

Peter Parrotta: Shawn Michaels pretty much was the "straw that stirred the drink" in the WWF in 1996. Michaels made WWF pay-per-views a lot more exciting to watch with his excellent matches at the end of the cards. Steve Austin gets second place for really starting to come into his own in 1996. He was the only heel who truly drew for the WWF. He did so without flamboyant outfits or fancy hair, but the fans are into him because he is cool and talented and "because Stone Cold said so, son." Chris Benoit gets third place for working his

ass off this year for WCW. If anyone deserves a run as WCW World Champion in 1997, it's the Canadian Crippler.

Mike Omansky: Hulk Hogan reinvented himself as a heel and solidified himself as the on-going superstar whose name still means the biggest box-office. Bret Hart solidified his strength with the absenteeism and return to the WWF while keeping up strong in-ring performance. Scott Hall's defection to WCW began the strongest angle that U.S. wrestling has seen in years.

Kathy Kraemer: Ric Flair continues to be the best despite his age. Diamond Dallas Page was improved and great on interviews. Shawn Michaels ring work excelled even against less savvy opponents.

John Siska: How many rookies win the WCW World Title? None, which makes Giant's initial year so incredible. Shawn Michaels carried the WWF through a very difficult time with the absence of Bret Hart and the Warrior's quitting, so he gets second. As one of ECW's most popular wrestlers, Sandman gets a hard-earned third spot.

Al Galdi: Yes, the NWO played a major role in the success of Nitro and WCW in 1996, but if not for the cruiserweights, WCW undercards would have been atrocious. The best of the bunch was undoubtedly Rey Mysterio Jr. He wrestled on eight major WCW shows and put in three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half star performances in each of them. How many other wrestlers can lay claim to that? Without the success of Rey Jr., WCW would have never signed Juventud Guerrera, Ultimo Dragon, et al, and paid more attention to the quality of their matches. Shawn Michaels was fantastic, but the deterioration of his character and the slow times endured by the WWF prevent him from being number one. Scott Hall and Kevin Nash were the driving force behind the angle of the decade. Their charisma and mic skills are second to none.

Mike Wenrich: The Giant is the hands down choice for MVP. He is the first and perhaps only star Bischoff has created. That alone deserves a lot of credit.

Jason Husby: I don't see how anyone couldn't vote Shawn Michaels as the MVP of 1996. He had more great matches than anyone and had the most impact in his federation. Steve Austin was number two due to his performances at King of the Ring and Survivor Series and he was the only heel worth watching in the WWF. No one in WCW had consistently good matches and a definite impact, so I give Sabu third since he still proved to be a main eventer in ECW and his matches with Van Dam and Scorpio were good.

Brian Yursha: Shawn Michaels get number one this year because he had great matches against Bret Hart, Diesel, British Bulldog, Owen Hart, and other wrestlers as well. His best match in 1996 was against Mankind at the Core State Center in Philadelphia. Michaels is a great athlete with

incredible wrestling maneuvers and he did a great job in '96 as the WWF champion. This was a great year for Steve Austin. He did the best interviews and his matches were excellent. Austin is a great wrestler and he takes great bumps as well. I really enjoyed his match against Bret Hart at the Survivor Series. I would like to see Austin vs. Michaels in '97. Chris Benoit gets third. He also had a great year. His matches are always exciting and he has really improved on interviews.

Abdul Malik Sani: Chris Benoit and Rey Mysterio Jr. tie for third place. Benoit is a great worker and now he has a meaningful role, which has made him the star of the Horsemen. Rey Jr. had a chance to showcase his brilliant skills in the U.S. He had a great run as cruiserweight champion and had many great matches against Malenko. Malenko and The Outsiders tie for second. Malenko had a chance to show his phenomenal skills and he had a great run as a cruiserweight champion. He had many great matches against Rey Jr. The Outsiders lit the promotion on fire and put Nitro over the top against Raw. Their invasion against WCW was brilliant and I couldn't wait to see them every week on Nitro. They didn't have any five star matches, but their impact warrants them the number two or one slot. I'll give Michaels the American MVP because he was best in the WWF after Bret took his hiatus. He had many classic matches during his run as champion and he drew as well.

John Molinaro: Rey Mysterio Jr. gets the top spot. No other star in North America had more four star matches than Rey Jr. He had a major role in increasing the quality of the product in WCW and singlehandedly put the WCW cruiserweight division on the map. Second goes to Chris Benoit whose stiff working style was a treat to watch this year as he brought new life to the stagnant Four Horsemen. Dean Malenko, through his scientific wizardry and unique ring work that combines aspects of American, Japanese, and Mexican wrestling, was able to communicate storylines in matches better than anybody else in the world.

Chris Clark: He'll be the first to tell you, but Shawn Michaels was the best of just about everything in wrestling in 1996. Bret Hart is a close second for similar reasons, and for never looking like a goof. Raven takes third place because he has an odd ability to rise above the gore and bloodlust of ECW.

Tim Dills: In a world still dominated by oversized performers, Rey Mysterio Jr. provided an alternative and a really entertaining one at that. He wins my vote because he helped usher American pro wrestling into the '90s (finally). Shawn Michaels was the dominant WWF force this year. Malenko proved to be very credible in establishing WCW's most entertaining division, the cruiserweights.

Andy MacConney: Raven and Sandman get the top two spots because they brought ECW into prominence.

—Please see MVP, pg. 19

2. Japanese MVP

Kenta Kobashi

1. Kenta Kobashi (40%)
2. Mitsuharu Misawa (23%)
3. Shinya Hashimoto (12%)
4. Jushin Liger (8%)
5. Keiji Muto (7%)
- 6-10) Manami Toyota, Ultimo Dragon, Shinjiro Otani, Great Sasuke, Akira Taue

PAST WINNERS

1995: Muto, Misawa, Toyota

1994: Steve Williams, Kobashi,

Toshiaki Kawada

1993: Kobashi, Stan Hansen, Liger

1992: Liger, Kobashi, Toyota

1991: Liger, Jumbo Tsuruta,

Kobashi

1990: Liger, Muto, Tsuruta

1989: Akira Maeda, Genichiro

Tenryu, Liger

behind and could perhaps surpass him in 1997. Hashimoto surprised me and remains one of the more underrated workers in Japan. His kicks are awesome.

John Molinaro: Kenta Kobashi. This was his year as he finally won the Japanese Triple Crown title. He had memorable matches with Kawada & Taue and flourished in tag matches all year. Mitsuharu Misawa gets second. Even in defeat Misawa showed why he is possibly the greatest worker of our times. Jushin Liger's booking of the junior heavyweights in New Japan followed a simple and logical, yet at the same time, compelling path that was a pleasure to watch all year.

Chris Bernes: Jushin Liger came back from a brain tumor and didn't miss many steps, and the ones he did miss he will definitely make up for in '97.

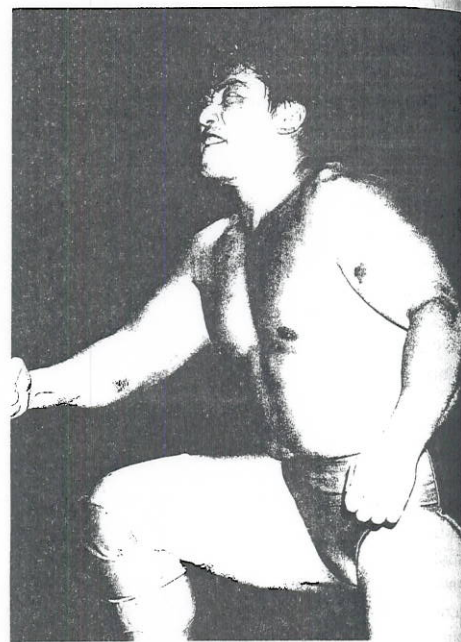
Fareed Barash: Kenta Kobashi gets my pick for his performances in big matches in 1996. All Japan took good advantage of Kobashi's strengths.

Annette Boyer: Kenta Kobashi deserves first place for finally winning the Triple Crown Title and assuming the top spot in All Japan wrestling. Long suffering Kobashi fans like me couldn't be happier for him. Manami Toyota is so good, she is taken for granted. She dominates her promotion like no other athlete in wrestling. Otani is consistently brilliant no matter who the foe.

Ted Bauer: Kenta Kobashi, in addition to being the world's best wrestler, finally won the Triple Crown Title in 1996, which makes 1996 the apex of his career, and thus he wins this award. Number two goes to Jushin Liger. The August J-Crown Tournament was his greatest moment to date and he put on a good show when he wrestled in American rings. Number three goes to Akira Taue, who also had a career-making year as he too captured Japan's highest honor in one of the most noteworthy cards of the decade.

Jason Williams: Jushin Liger had the toughest year of his career, and he should win this award just because he returned to the ring after a brain tumor.

Jim Zordani: Mitsuharu Misawa showed us something different this year. He made the transition from Triple Crown champ to Jun Akiyama's mentor and and tag team partner very smoothly. Despite nagging injuries during the second half of the year, Misawa was the best wrestler in the world. "Misawa, Misawa,



Misawa." I can hear those chants as I write this. Misawa is "simply the best, better than all the rest." Shinya Hashimoto has improved by leaps and bounds the last few years. He has reached the point where he is the best heavyweight wrestler in New Japan. He deserves to wear the IWGP strap. The fire possessed by Hashimoto isn't seen by many other wrestlers anywhere. This came across very well in his matches. When he beat Nobuhiko Takada for the IWGP Title last May, the pop from the fans was deafening. Shinjiro Otani is the best junior heavyweight in the world. He never has a bad match even against inferior opponents. Hopefully junior heavyweight booker Jushin Liger will realize in 1997 that Otani should wear the IWGP Jr. strap. That's one wish I'd like to see come true in 1997.

Dylan Hales: Akira Taue wins first place based on winning his first Triple Crown, the Carnival tourney, the tag titles, and the Tag League, plus improved his work ethic and reputation all at once. Shinjiro Otani is second based on work ethic and his non-selfish attitude. Kenta Kobashi finishes third based on workrate and rising to the occasion for big matches. Honorable mention to Shinya Hashimoto, Ultimo Dragon, and Mitsuharu Misawa.

Peter Parrotta: If anyone truly deserves to be Japan's MVP for 1996, it's Jushin Liger. He battled a brain tumor and overcame it only to begin to wrestle again a short time after having surgery to remove the tumor. He showed just how much he loves the sport by that show of courage and respect for the sport. That, to me, is truly a most valuable player.

READERS' AWARD COMMENTS

Bob Nichnadowicz: Kenta Kobashi finally got the title and he deserved it as he is without a doubt the finest wrestler in the world today. Misawa was his usual incredible self. Nobuhiko Takada drew too many big crowds in the early part of the year to be ignored.

Scott Druyan: Jushin Liger. The courage Liger showed battling a brain tumor and the recovery made spoke volumes for a man who already is at the top of many wrestling fans' lists of truly great aerial superstars.

Robert Etienne: Kyoko Inoue began the year by winning, for the third time, with Takako Inoue, the WWWA Tag Titles. She ended the year with a victory over the WWWA Champion Manami Toyota in an incredible five star match. She is the only one in this world to compete at the same level as Toyota.

Gary Miller: Shinjiro Otani is the fastest rising star in Japan. His work was very consistent and excellent.

Al Galdi: Even when he's not the focal point, Mitsuharu Misawa still turns in an unbelievable match. His battle with Akiyama against Williams and Ace this past June will go down as one of the best of the 1990s. The number one wrestler in the world, Kenta Kobashi is not far

3. Mexico MVP

1. Rey Misterio Jr. (58%)
2. Psicosis (12%)
3. Konnan (10%)
4. Juventud Guerrera (8%)
5. LaParka (7%)

6-10: Perro Aguayo Sr., El Hijo del Santo, Negro Casas, Heavy Metal, Perro Aguayo Jr.

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Rey Jr, Psicosis, Konnan

1994: Art Barr, Konnan, Aguayo

1995: Konnan, Rey Jr., Cien Caras

1992: Blue Panther, Konnan, Canadian Vampire

Marshall Goldberg: Rey Misterio Jr. is just fantastic, and the fact that he speaks English, as opposed to most of the other lucha stars ranks him no. 1.

Scott Druyan: Psicosis continues to impress all that are witness to this high flying superstar. His place amongst the best in the world is rapidly taking shape.

Brian Yursha: Rey Misterio Jr. is my top pick this year. His aerial maneuvers are amazing and his matches are always great especially his match against Juventud Guerrera that took place at the ECW arena in March. He is a great wrestler. Juventud Guerrera gets second because he was a big part in why Rey Jr.'s matches against him were so great. Guerrera and Misterio Jr. put on a match of the year candidate this past March in Philadelphia. Psicosis gets third. His high-flying moves are spectacular. He is amazing athlete.

Ted Bauer: Rey Misteiro wins here. He had an incredible year in AAA and WCW, surpassing Psicosis as the best flyer in Mexico. His feud with Juventud was generally realistic. Pierroth gets no. 2. He became a big deal in Mexico this year during his ECW-style feud with Konnan, and towards the end of the year moved towards WWF, which should help his recognition. Konnan spent too much of the year facing jobbers for the WCW U.S. Title to be considered for no. 1. His match with Flair in July should have been a lot better. If Konnan is really the "next Hulk Hogan," and Hogan has had memorable matches with Flair, then Konnan's 1996 was a real disappointment.

Jim Zordani: Rey Misterio Jr. puts his body on the line in every match. His battles with Juventud Guerrera and Psicosis were incredible this past year. His high-flying maneuvers are unmatched by anyone in professional wrestling. Hector

Rey Misterio Jr.



Garza was the best wrestler in EMLL during 1996. Tape collectors take note. If you see Garza listed on an EMLL tape pick it up and you won't be disappointed by this high flyer. I know I wasn't. El Hijo del Santo jumped from AAA to EMLL this year and began feuding with Negro Casas Santo is the biggest star in EMLL as far as I'm concerned and this past year his ring work was solid. Plus, I love his ring music.

John Molinaro: Konnan gets first for his visionary booking style that set northern border towns such as Tijuana, Mexicali, and Nuevo Laredo on fire. In 1996 Konnan changed the landscape of lucha libre in Mexico and left Pena, the commission, and the old guard shaking their heads. By leaving AAA and bringing its best workers with him over to Promo Azteca, Konnan showed why he is the most influential person in Mexico. Rey Misterio Jr. gets second. By adapting to Konnan's ECW/FMW style of booking in the Northern territory, Rey showed that he can thrive in any environment. His willingness to attempt daredevil stunts almost every month at Tijuana's Palanque and Auditorio are a testament to this man's courage. Negro Casas gets third for leading EMLL through a hot run from September to the end of the year, (its hottest run in a long time). Attendance picked up drastically at Arena Mexico over the last three months because of Casas and his work.

Chris Burnes: Rey Misterio Jr. is fast becoming the yardstick by which other Mexican wrestlers are measured.

Bob Nichnadowicz: Konnan may not have had the best year in the ring, but he changed the face of wrestling in Mexico by getting them exposure in WCW and taking most of the big stars away from AAA in forming Promo Azteca.

MVP continued from pg. 17

Chris Burns: Shawn Michaels continues to give stellar performances, despite some negative fan reaction. Steve Austin is breaking out after years of being misused and could very well be a runaway for '97 MVP. Taz just keeps getting better.

Betty Schaffer: Number one goes to Shawn Michaels because he is an incredible worker and has great star appeal. Hulk Hogan played an important role this year. He's not a great worker but he did turn it up a notch or two over past years. He even finally took a loss in the ring. Randy Savage was part of the anti-Hogan group and managed to keep a lot of interest in him going. I would have liked to include Bret Hart, but with eight months out of action I didn't feel he qualified.

Greg Pelfrey: Bret Hart is a hard worker and has exceptional talent and could be a big name for many years to come. Stone Cold is the ultimate heel and makes his fights really look as real as anybody could. Rey Misterio Jr. is amazing and makes a good match with anyone WCW puts in the ring.

Henrik Rautila: Shawn Michaels continues to be the most charismatic pro wrestler in North America. In his matches against Diesel, Hart, Bulldog, Mankind, and Vader, he made WWF pay-per-views decent with the show-stealing match. He showed good work ethic when losing to Sid and he carried Sid to the best match of his career. Throughout the year Michaels made the best of his opponents and proved he is fully capable of adjusting his style when facing opponents with different styles and work ethics. Eddie Guerrero gets second. He made any match interesting with his world class work, incredible high flying, and great charisma. He had some great matches during 1996. The matches against Malenko and Benoit made the best of him, but during '96 he also proved to be able to face "bigger names" such as Ric Flair. And 1996 will be known as the year when Steve Austin became a major player.

Allan Greenberg: Shawn Michaels. At last, a destiny fulfilled. The type was proved true. Rey Jr. gets second. Austin should be the Michaels or '97 or '98 if the WWF doesn't screw it up.

Ellery Lively: Steve Austin, Chris Benoit, and Sid. I could put Hulk Hogan in the top three for his latter work with the NWO, but I won't add to his ego.

Sal Dellioala: Shane Douglas had probably the best "heel year" ever. Vince has to be kicking himself now. Shawn Michaels was as solid as ever in the ring but the whole Diana Smith thing as never resolved and his interviews suck. Steve Austin really took off and could be the man for the next five years.

4. Match of the Year

Bret vs. Austin

1. Bret Hart vs. Steve Austin, Survivor Series, 11/17 (14%)

2. Michaels vs. Diesel, IYH, 4/28 (12%)

3. Michaels vs. Mankind, IYH Mindgames, (12%)

4. Michaels vs. Bret, Wrestlemania, 3/31 (10%)

5. Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera, Bash, 7/7 (8%)

6-10 Rey Jr. vs. Dean Malenko, Halloween Havoc, 10/27; Rey Jr. vs. Juventud, ECW Arena, 3/9; Sabu vs. Rob Van Dam, ECW Arena, 4/20; Rey Jr. vs. Ultimo Dragon, World War 3; Michaels vs. British Bulldog, IYH Beware of Dog

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Michaels vs. Ramon, Michaels vs. Jarrett, Guerrero vs. Malenko

1994: Michaels vs. Ramon, Barr & Guerrero vs. Santo & Octagon, Owen vs. Bret

1995: Vader vs. Flair, Vader vs. Cactus, Vader vs. Sting

1992: Pillman vs. Liger, Royal Rumble, WarGames

1991: Sting & Luger vs. Steiners, Bret vs. Hennig, Rick Steamboat & Dustin Rhodes vs. Zbyszko & Arn Anderson

1990: Bobby Eaton & Stan Lane vs. Tracy Smothers & Steve Armstrong, Hogan vs. Ultimate Warrior, Nasty Boys vs. Steiners

1989: Flair vs. Steamboat (2/20), Flair vs. Steamboat (4/2), Flair vs. Steamboat (5/7)

1988: Flair vs. Sting, Bobby Fulton & Tommy Rogers vs. Eaton & Lane, Flair vs. Luger

Ted Bauer: Bret vs. Austin at Survivor Series comes in first for a number of reasons. First, it was too hard to pick between all of the great Michaels matches of 1996. Second, it was an incredible, stiff match with a lot of heat. Third, it perfectly reintroduced Hart to WWF rings while bringing the credibility of Austin as a wrestler to new heights. It worked on so many levels. Number two goes to Michaels vs. Mankind at September In Your House. It was an interesting mix of styles that resulted in a terrific match with a lousy Dusty finish. Number three goes to Sabu vs. Van Dam at ECW Arena on Aug. 3. Simply the most brutal and innovative match of the year in the most brutal and innovative promotion of the year, ECW.

Mike Wennich: I was at the Great American Bash and the Benoit vs. Sullivan match was great. There was so much intensity and action that people were talking about it all night. It's too bad I didn't make it to the bathroom to see them brawl in there, but they still put on a helluva show. It was also the night WCW finally put Benoit over. (What took them so long, anyway?) Bret vs. Austin at Survivor Series is second because of Bret's return and Austin's character. I didn't like the end result, but it was excellent nonetheless. Number three is Misterio vs. Malenko at Halloween Havoc. One of their matches deserves to be on the list and that was their best one to date. Malenko and Misterio are such great talents, and they should have headlined that card instead of that 75 year old blading has-been that shall remain nameless who is in desperate need of a rocking chair.

Mark Underwood: The best match I saw was Too Cold Scorpio vs. Chris Jericho on ECW weekly TV because it most closely resembled a legitimate "athletic contest" with psychology, strategy, and suspense as to who would win.

Jim Zordan: Rey Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera on Mar. 9 at ECW Arena. Calling it match of the year doesn't say enough. Both men were spectacular, hitting every spot. Just thinking about this bout makes me want to watch it again. The best compliment I can give to this off the chart contest is that after viewing it the first time, I became a lucha fan for life. No kidding. Sabu vs. Too Cold Scorpio on Feb. 17 at ECW Arena gets second. It was Sabu's best match of the year and showed he could go move for move with Sabu. The bout featured great use of a steel chair as a springboard. This was another great ECW bout with no blood or outside interference. Contrary to popular opinion, ECW does have those types of matches. Shawn Michaels vs. Mankind on Sept. 22 gets third. It featured Michaels giving his typical four-plus star performance in addition to Mick Foley showing

fans that he's still hardcore. One of the best WWF matches I've ever seen.

Abdul Malik Sani: Third place goes to Bret vs. Austin at Survivor Series. It was great to see Bret back from his hiatus and the events leading up to the match were dramatic. The match was technically superb with brawling and a real doubt as to who would win. Second place goes to Michaels vs. Mankind at IYH Mindgames. The match had incredible moves, stiff action, and incredible bumps such as the bump through the table off the top rope by both Michaels and Mankind. The lack of finish hurt it a bit, but the match was undeniably great. First place goes to Bret vs. Michaels at Wrestlemania. Over one hour of tremendous back and forth action with the final five minutes of regulation superb. A fall here and there would not have hurt, but the overtime was brilliant. I can watch the match over and over and enjoy it each time.

Russell Brown: No two wrestlers worked better together in 1996 than Rob Van Dam and Sabu. Their matches contained a perfect mix of mat wrestling, brawling, and aerial moves. Despite injuries and adverse working conditions (a collapsing ring) their efforts would go unsurpassed. The theme of their short-lived feud was a "matter of respect." The respect earned was not only of each other, but also the fans.

Henrik Rautila: The 60 minute Iron Man match of Bret Hart vs. Shawn Michaels at Wrestlemania was, although a poorly booked finish, the best match in 1996 and it topped the Michaels vs. Ramon ladder match in 1995. The build up before the match was truly great and the match was as good as any match in the world and I would bet they will top it in 1997. Sabu vs. Scorpio on Feb. 17 at ECW Arena gets second. The efforts and amazing bumps they took drew the amazing heat they had, especially for Sabu's "career ending move for sure" when flipping off of a chair in the ring, over the top and through a table in the first row on to Scorpio. It was the move of the year. Styles yelling, "He's dead, he's dead" surely seemed justified. Austin vs. Bret. Considering Bret's long absence and Austin's relative inexperience, this match gets third, it would have been ranked better if Austin had won, though.

Brian Yursha: Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera from the ECW Arena on Mar. 9 is my top choice for the match of the year. The incredible moves in that two-out-of-three falls match were amazing, such as Rey Jr. giving Guerrera a hurricanrana off the hood of a car. Shawn Michaels vs. Mankind from Philadelphia on Sept. 22 was incredible. I was there live and couldn't believe some of the amazing things they

4. Match of the Year

did. I really liked the spot where Michaels and Mankind went through the announcing table together. They are both great athletes. Bret Hart vs. Steve Austin from MSG on Nov. 17 gets third. They put on a great match together.

Dylan Hales: Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis at the Bash was the best match I've seen in years. The four way match for the ECW TV Title with Scorpio, Pitbull2, Douglas, and Jericho was top notch all the way. Austin and Bret lived up to all the hype and then some and produced a great match. Honorable mention to all of the Rey Jr. vs. Malenko bouts (except the one at the Clash) and the Van Dam vs. Sabu respect match.

Mike Malesev: Misterio and Psicosis had a five star match at Bash at the Beach with a workrate nobody could match. Diesel had his best match ever against Shawn Michaels at In Hour House. Sabu and Rob Van Dam tore the house down at Hostile City Showdown.

Jason Amari: Even though it started relatively slow, the last ten minutes of the Shawn Michaels vs. Bret Hart match was phenomenal. The promos used to hype the match were believable and added a terrific amount of drama. Both men worked for over an hour to make this match the classic it has turned out to be. Michaels vs. Mankind and Michaels vs. Diesel get second and third.

Chuck Kaye: I actually forgot Michaels vs. Diesel was a worked match at times. I actually jumped out of my chair in celebration when Michaels won. Second goes to Michaels vs. Bret for sheer endurance and third to Michaels vs. Mankind for sheer brutality.

Eric McHugh: I saw the Mar. 9 Misterio vs. Guerrero match in Philadelphia and it was even more amazing on TV than live, if you can imagine that. Extreme lucha libre nonstop for three falls and 20 minutes. The June 22 Dreamer vs. Brian Lee weapons match in Philly gets second. I saw this live, both the part in the arena and the part outside, and I've never seen anything like it live in my life. Sabu vs. Van Dam on Apr. 20 gets third. It really started their series and was the best of their lot.

Gary Shirker: While there were matches with more highspots and maybe more demanding moves, as far as excitement, surprises, action, and storyline all wrapped into one, nothing can match Michaels vs. Diesel at IYH. Michaels vs. Mankind is a close second, falling short because of the lame run-in finish. Michaels vs. Bulldog gives him the clean sweep. Michaels is the best.

Marshal Golberg: No match compared to either of the Shawn Michaels vs. Razor Ramon ladder matches of the previous two years.

Scott Druyan: The WWF Sept. 22 IYH saw Shawn Michaels and Mankind take the WWF to a new level. Both men gave five star

performances. I was particularly glad to see someone like Mick Foley, who has paid his dues, in the main event.

Bob Nichnadowicz: The Diesel vs. Shawn Michaels match in Omaha had a tremendous amount of heat, Nash's best match ever and a unique ending. The Rey Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera match from Mar. 9 at ECW was the greatest match I've ever witnessed live. Just a giant 15 minute highspot. Mankind vs. Shawn Michaels was brutal and believable.

Al Galdi: Malenko vs. Ultimo Dragon was 20 plus minutes of great matwork and highspots. The two were rewarded with great fan heat, a sign the juniors are getting over. As good a cruiserweight match as you'll see. Had it gone 30 minutes, Michaels vs. Hart would be number one. That whole 60 minute thing never quite worked, be it from legit tension between the two or whatever. But it was still the greatest main event in Wrestlemania history. Misterio vs. Ultimo Dragon from World War III was a highspot clinic.

John Molinaro: Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis at the Bash at the Beach gave both wrestlers a chance to showcase their enormous talents on a national pay-per-view for the first time. They did not disappoint. The match was easily four-and-three-quarter stars and was the match that sent Misterio on his way to becoming WCW's hottest commodity.

Chris Burnes: Bret Hart vs. Steve Austin at Survivor Series reminded me why I love wrestling. Sabu and Van Dam was well done as well as exciting. Michaels vs. Hart gets third. Too many slow moments, but still excellent.

Scott Hughes: Bret vs. Shawn. Where else but Wrestlemania could the match of the year take place? One hour of action and no disappointment. Austin vs. Bret at SummerSlam gets second. After seven months off Bret showed why he is called the Excellence of Execution. Austin is the next big superstar in pro wrestling and is only going to get better. A match with two of the top five workers in America cannot go wrong.

Phil Piscano: The most all-around sound match in years wins—Hitman vs. Austin at Survivor Series. It totally lived up to its high expectations with unbelievable crowd heat. Michaels vs. Diesel at IYH was almost too good to be true. Thanks to Kevin Nash for not quitting one match-early and to Michaels for another of his great ones. Third was Malenko vs. Misterio Jr. at Starrcade. It can't be first because there wasn't enough emotion or storyline to it.

Rodet Etienne: Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels surpassed themselves in the Iron Man match, assembling the greatest WWF World Title bout in history. Not being familiar with the All Japan style, the audience was slow to react to the fine

mat wrestling and gear shifting, but even the lack of crowd heat could not spoil this fascinating battle of skill and technique.

Allen Greenberg: Michaels vs. Mankind is first. They blew away all the invisible rules of a WWF contest to give the wild style a major league license. Paul E. should have received a thank you note. Malenko vs. Dragon was beautifully technical and technically beautiful. Bret vs. Michaels gets an "A" for effort and an "Q" for questionable booking of the finish.

Dan Kuester: A four-way dance for the ECW TV Title had a little bit of each of the things that set ECW apart—tremendous mat work, beautiful high flying moves, unpredictable angles, and yes, Francine taking the bump of the year from Pitbull2. I can't remember seeing 35-plus minutes of incredible action like that in years.

John Siska: All questions were answered following April's IYH on whether Shawn Michaels would be a competent champion when he beat Kevin Nash in a no holds barred match. It was a classic ECW-style brawl which brought out the best in both men, catapulting Shawn into an eight month title reign and giving Nash credibility going into WCW soon thereafter. Bret vs. Austin gets second only because Michaels vs. Nash had more heat. Michaels vs. Mankind at September's IYH gets third, as Mankind took Shawn to the Extreme right in Philadelphia.

Dennis Christman: Steve Austin vs. Bret Hart at the Survivor Series in New York was a very intense, hardcore style match.

Harry Simon: The Michaels vs. Hart Wrestlemania Iron Man match is the de facto winner, if nothing else for giving Michaels a suitable springboard to the best year of his career. Sabu vs. Van Dam at "A Matter of Respect" wasn't just a great match. It gave Van Dam a long overdue push. How many wrestlers have beaten Sabu in the ECW Arena? Michaels vs. Mankind had the same can't-take-your-eyes-off-it quality as the celebrated Michaels vs. Ramon ladder matches of yesteryear. It's just too bad they gave us a screwjob ending, or this could've snagged the top honor.

Tim Cobb: Bret vs. Austin was a well-paced match and made Bret's return more important and the loss did not scar Austin one bit. Misterio vs. Liger was the best WCW match to date. I hope a return is in order. Michaels vs. Mankind was terrific, also.

David Frey: While watching Guerrero vs. Benoit on Nitro, my wife turned to me and said, "I don't believe I'm enjoying this." High praise indeed.

Robert O'Connor: I don't think there have ever been so many North American match of the year candidates as there were in 1996. Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis at Bash. at the Beach was too well

4. Match of the Year

executed and spectacular not to get first. Rey Jr. vs. Ultimo Dragon at WW3 was a close second. Sabu vs. Too Cold Scorpio on Feb. 17 was incredible. Both men put their bodies on the line to produce a classic.

Pete Houston: Michaels vs. Diesel was just an intense match. The heat between the two was amazing. The bump Michaels took through the table looked so real. I liked when Shawn taunted WCW after his victory. Hart vs. Austin. Two words: kicked ass. Michaels vs. Hart was amazing and entertaining for a whole hour.

Chris Cressman: The four man match for the ECW TV Title at Heat Wave was the only match I saw all year that held my attention for the whole match. I can't say the same thing for anything from WCW or the WWF.

Laurie Webber: The Pitbulls vs. Raven & Richards was intense, extreme, and with all the different moves each contributed, it was hardcore.

Rob Mansfield: Shawn vs. Bret is one for the books. It is one of the top five matches to ever come out of the WWF. Man, is Steve Austin destined for big things if the WWF bigwigs don't restrain him. Austin vs. Bret was another fabulous match. Mankind vs. Shawn was phenomenal as well. Mankind and the WWF jelled pretty well so far.

Bryan Meyers: Michaels vs. Diesel at April IYH had great storyline behind it, had both men working to the best of their ability, and McMahon's commentary only added to Michaels's underdog image. The finish was the most creative one done by either of the big two. Michaels vs. Bret at Wrestlemania was the moment the torch was passed to Michaels. Even though Hart held Michaels back from having his style of match, Michaels proved his worth as a great all-around worker by showing he is an accomplished mat wrestler. The match was booked for a climactic finish and to start the Michaels vs. Hart feud. Michaels vs. Mankind at the September IYH proved Michaels's toughness.

Erik Krol: Misterio vs. Malenko produced some of the best matches of this year and I can't wait to see the Michaels vs. Bret rematch live in Chicago. The Hogan turn deserves a vote because of its sheer historical significance.

Steven Watson: Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera on Mar. 9 was an amazing must-be-seen-to-be-believed best two out of three falls war between the best high flyers anywhere. The match was filled with non-stop action, thrills, and highspots and thus becomes the number one match of the year. Sabu vs. Scorpio on Feb. 17 was another amazing match with one half hour of all out action and highspots. It was Sabu's finest match of his career. Shawn Michaels vs. Diesel was a great

match and Michaels's best of the year. It wasn't the typical burial match for Diesel because Diesel looked fantastic in defeat and Michaels's bump through the table was spectacular.

Annette Boyer: Bret vs. Austin lived up to the hype at Survivor Series. Hart showed little rust and Austin looked strong in defeat. Shawn vs. Diesel kicked off Michaels's reign with a bang. Chairshots, a fire extinguisher, a jackknife through a table, and a prosthetic leg—what more could you want? Scorpio vs. Sabu received little fanfare, but was as excellent a thirty minute draw you'll ever see.

Pat Radice: Bret vs. Austin gets first because of the build up and that Austin finally showed people he could do what he said. But Bret should have lost.

Greg Pelfrey: At the Survivor Series Bret Hart proved that he can still create a great match and Austin proved that he can still have great matches.

Bill DeRosier: Bret vs. Austin had the biggest build-up and they both came through terrific. The next best thing would have been putting Austin over. Eliminators vs. Sabu & Van Dam was the most action-packed match I have ever seen. All four men worked their asses off. Michaels vs. Hart gets third. Anytime a match goes an hour, it has to be a great one.

Jeffrey Cohen: Bret Hart still has it. Nobody every denied Steve Austin didn't. Together they gave what should be the first of several memorable encounters in U.S. rings. Rey Misterio was in more great matches in the U.S. than any other grappler last year. His match with Psicosis at Bash at the Beach was a highlight.

Jason Williams: The Michaels vs. Diesel match from IYH had everything. It had tons of excitement and told a great storyline. Michaels sold his ass off for his good friend, including taking a huge bump through McMahon's table. The part with Mad Dog's leg was both funny and mean at the same time.

Eric Nelson: Bret vs. Michaels made the star out of Michaels he continued to be all year. Sabu vs. Scorpio was awesome and was the perfect example of an ECW match. Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis was my first time seeing them together and it got me pumped for Rey's title win the next night.

Tom Ferreira: The Michaels vs. Hart match at Wrestlemania was important to the WWF, not just because of the incredible effort these two put forth, but because it laid the groundwork for the current "nobody gets along" storyline that could be the angle that puts the WWF back on top.

Patrick McNeill: Sabu and Van Dam had a great series of matches, but I'm still partial to the match from "A Matter of Respect." A grand finale match and I'll be amazed if they manage to

top it at Wrestlemania. Even the non-wrestling fans in my household were glued to the screen for the final 15 minutes. Misterio vs. Malenko was "the shot heard round the world" that heralded a new era for Monday Nitro. The best TV match of the year in the Big Two.

Chris Kelly: The Malenko vs. Dragon match was nearly 20 minutes of unbelievable action. Psicosis vs. Misterio took their feud to another level at Bash at the Beach and Michaels showed how he can be "hardcore" to those Philly fans.

Jason Withee: Bret vs. Shawn was 60 minutes of wrestling without a fall or boring anyone for even a few seconds.

Robb McMahon: The Eliminators vs. Sabu & Rob Van Dam was an awesome 30 minutes. All four received very deserving standing ovations. This was one of the very few times I joined in with the "five more minutes" chants. Shawn Michaels and Mankind had a tremendous brawl with tons of great bumps.

Seth Berger: PPV companies may be quick to condemn ECW for the ultra-violent and sexual connotations on their shows, but what you will never hear admitted is that ECW can have the greatest matches in the clutch moments of a card. Hence my top three: Douglas vs. Scorpio at "A Matter of Respect," the ultimate rematch as a four-way elimination at "Heat Wave '96," and the three-way dance ECW Title match at "A Matter of Respect." Shane Douglas has returned to the limelight where he belongs and his match with Too Cold was fantastic.

Chris Palmatier: Michaels vs. Hart at Wrestlemania will never be topped until they meet again. The 60 minutes went so quickly. The first 60 was the greatest. And the last three minutes were the worst because there should not have been another three minutes.

Frank Van Alstine: The WWF did a good job of hyping Bret vs. Michaels. Unlike WCW, the WWF gets the most from their talented workers in their biggest angles. Although the Iron Man match was not as exciting as some of the cruiserweight matches in WCW, at least they had a good angle to go along with it, an angle that will most likely be the cornerstone of Wrestlemania 13.

Peter Parrotta: Even though it had a screwjob ending, my choice for match of the year is Shawn Michaels vs. Mankind from IYH: Mindgames. The psychology employed by Michaels was excellent, the brawling exciting, and the finish was awesome with Michaels superkicking the chair into Mankind's face while Mankind was on the top rope. Except for the Vader run in, it was a great match. It would have made a lot more sense if they just had Michaels pin Mankind since Mankind was clearly out of it. That's just typical WWF booking, I guess. Michaels's matches were the best this year.

5. Heel of the Year

Steve Austin

1. Steve Austin (32%)
2. Shane Douglas (26%)
3. Hulk Hogan (25%)
4. Raven(7%)
5. Mankind (4%)
- 6-10) Kevin Nash, Taz, Scott Hall, Goldust, Chris Benoit

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: Ric Flair, Raven, Cactus Jack**
1994: Bob Backlund, Shawn Michaels, Shane Douglas
1993: Vader, Jerry Lawler, Michaels
1992: Rick Rude, Ric Flair, Vader
1991: Jake Roberts, Undertaker, Ric Flair
1990: Flair, Stan Hansen, Curt Hennig
1989: Terry Funk, Lex Luger, Randy Savage
1988: Ted DiBiase, Barry Windham, Eddie Gilbert

E. Sayers: Steve Austin did and said just about anything to get over as a great heel.

Laurie Webber: Raven proved to be the ultimate heel with the stealing of another man's wife and child. He's so evil, it's awesome.

Bryan Meyers: Steve Austin was the perfect ass-kicking heel for the WWF. He excelled all year, from his matches against Mero early in the year to the Austin 3:16 interview, to his peak during the Pillman gun incident and the Survivor Series vignettes. Giant made a name for himself early in the year being in main events of pay-per-views and later an important, vocal member of the NWO even though Hogan stepped all over his lines. For the first half of the year Goldust was the IC Champ and in the second half he main evented against Michaels and Sid around the horn. His "gay" tactics got the most heat of anyone in the U.S.

Jeff Wyatt: It's amazing how great Hogan is as a heel. He seems to get more arrogant each week. Steve Austin has become a major star and shows no signs of letting up. Douglas has been very convincing with his attacks on Pitbull1 and Tommy Dreamer.

Jason Smith: Steve Austin worked so hard to get heat through his extraordinary mic work that he was cheered by many, myself included. This rebel

against the establishment role is one of the greatest heel roles I've ever seen. Despite how popular the rest of the NWO is, Hogan is so hated, it is simply impossible for him to turn babyface and expect to be cheered by most of the fans. He should just stay a heel. Until Hogan turned heel, Goldust was the most hated man in the sport. Dustin Rhodes played the character to a tee.

Steve Watson: Steve Austin was so great on mic work and working the crowds that it would be a crime not to name him best heel. Mankind's manic behavior and matches with Undertaker put him over with the crowd and made him one of the WWF's top heels. Raven and his cult attitude and bloody matches during his title reign got great crowd reactions and his interviews with Sandman's son alone earn him a spot as a top heel.

Annette Boyer: Steve Austin was the most complete heel in wrestling this year. He took the badass routine to a whole new level. His work was strong and behind the mic he was solid. Shane Douglas's recipe for heel heat was simple—team with Francine, feud with fan faves the Pitbulls and Dreamer, and cut killer interviews. Contrary to what Hogan would have you believe, Kevin Nash is the reason the NWO is over.

Jesus Cortez Jr.: Shane Douglas had some of the best and most evil interviews and some wicked angles. He gets a ton of heat from the fans. He's simply the man everyone loves to hate and for all the right reasons, unlike Hulk Hogan, who people hate because he just plain sucks. Steve Austin put some much needed life into the way too softcore WWF and became their top heel. Taz suplexed everyone in sight, invaded Raw, and was the king of heel heat for most of the year. That's good enough for number three. The only problem was that his matches were, against mostly jobbers, and he started to get face heat here and there, which isn't good if you're a heel.

Carlie Gill: Steve Austin is the hottest heel in a promotion that historically does not have strong heels, and at a time when the NWO seems to be the only thing on people's minds. Still, Austin snuck up on us all this year. Second goes to Raven. His schtick is starting to get old and some of the stuff ECW had him do this year went beyond extreme into the offensive. (the mock crucifixion), but he's totally believable in his role. Third goes to Hulk Hogan. His arrogant, self-centered, obnoxious, insecure, whiny personality contains all the things that it takes to be a good heel. Hogan has it in spades, naturally. No acting required.

Bill De Roseier: Shane Douglas gets tremendous heat every time. No one gets fans to hate him like Shane does. Austin is the best heel the WWF has ever had. The worst mistake WCW ever made was

jerk him around. As for Raven, you have to hate a guy who messes with another man's family.

Pat Radice: Taz was the best heel in 1996 because the fans hated him and his interviews about them and Sabu were great.

Rob Mansfield: Hands down it was Hulk Hogan. He killed Hulkamania (Thank God!!!) and in the process picked up better friends than the Booty Moron. Austin probably pissed off everyone he wanted to in '96 including Bret, Bulldog, Marc Mero, and his ol' pal Brian Pillman. It's funny how the fans cheer him anyway.

Eric Krol: Nick Patrik deserves an honorable mention for being the American Tirantes.

Patrick McNeill: This was an especially strong year for heels in wrestling. Shane Douglas comes out on top for finishing what he started in 1995 in ECW. He got true heel heat in ECW Arena, which I thought was impossible and his interviews make Kevin Sullivan and Mick Foley look like girl scouts. Austin would have won except he is a little too hip and funny for the room. He also got a late start due to Ted DiBiase doing his interviews for him the first five months?! Eric Bischoff was the only real heel in WCW for the entire year in '96 and may win outright in '97.

Jeffrey Cohen: The Ringmaster gimmick was destined to doom. And Vince didn't trust Austin enough to do his own interviews, so he saddled him with Ted DiBiase. Once the blinders were removed at King of the Ring, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin came into his own as a premier heel. Nash and Hall, lumped together, were the hottest heels in WCW. Mankind started the year as Cactus Jack to end his ECW run, and finished 1996 providing Undertaker with his best working feud in years.

Greg Casterioto: Steve Austin finally reached his potential this year and gives the WWF a truly hot heel to have for years to come. As much as I hate Hogan, I have to give him credit for coming across as an arrogant jerk in his "Hollywood" character. I guess the best babyfaces really do make the best heels. As for Taz, he wasn't your typical wrestling heel this year, but he was one of the best. If ECW's pay-per-views don't succeed, I can definitely see him going to the WWF.

Jason Williams: Hogan was one of the most heated men in wrestling when he was a babyface, so of course he's going to be the best heel. His turn totally re-started his career.

Dave Moore: Ric Flair receives an honorary nomination, just because of a 25 year loyalty. No one can touch the lows that the Franchise character sank to in 1996.

6. Best Babyface

1. Shawn Michaels (42%)
2. Bret Hart (24%)
3. Sycho Sid (12%)
4. Lex Luger (9%)
5. Undertaker (8%)
- 6-10) Sting, Ahmed Johnson,

Eddie Guerrero, Tommy Dreamer,
Roddy Piper

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: Michaels, Bret, Sting
1994: Bret, Sting, Hulk Hogan
1993: Bret, Sting, Ric Flair
1992: Sting, Bret, Randy Savage
1991: Hogan, Sting, Savage
1990: Hogan, Sting, Luger
1989: Hogan, Flair, Sting
1988: Sting, Hogan, Savage

D. Scot Bergantz: Randy Savage gets first. Anyone who can get beat up, spray painted, humiliated by the Four Horsemen, NWO, and Lex Luger and still maintain substantial popularity and professionalism definitely has my vote.

Chris Kelly: Sandman is the drunk, nicotine addicted, cane swinging badass that by no means should be liked, but you've got to love him.

Seth Berger: Simply put, my top choice is Bret "Wrestling Has Gone Too Far Out of Control" Hart. Hart may be showing a little attitude now, but he's still the people's choice.

Chris Palmatier: Shawn Michaels got the loudest cheers from the crowd until the Survivor Series. Eleven months is enough to get the first place spot.

Henrik Rautila: Eddie Guerrero is the perfect babyface. If matched right he would draw great. Unfortunately there isn't room for Guerrero in the top spot in WCW given the NWO situation. Shawn Michaels plays his total babyface as well, but lost some of his credibility when breaking character several times during the year. Bret Hart drew great early in the year, his comeback was inspiring, and it's impressive that he sold the most merchandise second to Michaels during his long hiatus. Had he left the WWF for WCW, the WWF would have been in deep trouble.

Dennis Christman: Lex Luger gets first. Despite rumors about joining the NWO, Luger defied the odds and remained a babyface while Sting took on a bizarre tweener role. The fans pop big for Lex, and I feel he should finish off his

Shawn Michaels

career as a babyface. Eddie Guerrero, aside from being a superb worker, is a charming, likable personality who fans really respond to.

Mark Black: Nobody in the WWF got a bigger pop than Psycho Sid. Even though his workrate is way below average, he is loaded with charisma. Second is Shawn Michaels who combines his charisma along with his great workrate. He still gets a great pop from the crowds. Bret gets third.

Brian Keenan: Despite being gone half the year, Bret's genuine likability still gives him this award. Sandman is a natural character for ECW fans to rally around. Shawn Michaels drops to third because of his conduct toward his detractors.

Peter Parrotta: Rey Misterio Jr. is the no. 1 babyface for being the most lovable underdog in history (sorry Mikey Whipwreck). Come on, even I felt sorry for him when Kevin Nash threw him into the side of that backstage trailer this past summer—and I realize it was a work. Imagine how others who knew less about wrestling's inner workings must have felt. Eddie Guerrero gets second for being a loveable underdog as well, and Sid takes third for his popularity with the fans despite his "chemical imbalance of the brain."

David Frey: Even in the ill-conceived role as "the lost soul," Sting is still more over than any other heel. This just shows how important Sting is as a face.

Chris Cressman: Shawn Michaels electrified crowds like no one else this year. Until Survivor Series, that is. Eddie Guerrero wins second for working his butt off and earning the fans' respect, despite the lack of a push from WCW.

Edezal Carr: Bret Hart's return to the WWF was like a sheriff coming to clean up a corrupt town. Everyone respects him and his skills.

John Siska: Even though it was painfully obvious that he would claim the title at Wrestlemania, Shawn Michaels held the fans in the palm of his hands from winning the Rumble to beating Owen in February's IYH to his overtime win over Bret and on to his numerous challenges that lay ahead. Shawn gets first without a shadow of a doubt.

Mike Wenrich: Lex Luger doesn't get the credit he rightfully deserves. It's about time he's on the straight and narrow while Sting's the one who isn't trustworthy. Luger is the most credible babyface to stand up to the NWO so far and has as good of charisma as anyone. Eddie Guerrero's charisma and phenomenal skills make him an

obvious choice. Bret Hart is still the best babyface in the WWF, whether he's screaming or not.

Chris Clark: From mic work to ring work, Shawn Michaels was easily the best of the good guys in 1996. In the second spot. Bret Hart gave sensible people something to cheer about. And in third place lands Eddie Guerrero because even without a decent push or spotlight, he endeared himself to the fans.

Russell Brown: It was only one match, but a call went out for someone to squash the crybaby Hulkster. Roddy Piper answered that call and won the hearts of all with a clean win.

Tim Dills: For his stint as WWF Champ, Shawn Michaels takes this award. Sting comes in second for his Crow-like run toward the year's end. Savage takes third for his face role against Flair and, later, against Hogan. Both feuds were pivotal for a great deal of WCW's success this year.

R.D. Murray: Bret Hart is consistent and gives great interviews. Shawn Michaels is a close second, although appears to be losing ground. Same goes for Sting.

Mike Omansky: Roddy Piper was vintage in his WCW appearances and is still unchallenged in generating babyface heat. Bret Hart still gets revered reactions upon his appearances. Sting gets third.

Andy MacConney: Tommy Dreamer was the only consistent ECW face.

Marshal Goldberg: The beauty of Shawn, Kevin, Scott, Sandman, and many others is that they are neither heel nor babyface. They are in that great area between both. I really like where wrestling has gone in merging heels and faces and letting the fan choose whom to cheer and boo. I credit ECW for starting this trend but the majors have certainly expanded it. Stone Cold is also in that class of above mentioned heel/faces.

Jeff Wyatt: I'm glad Shawn Michaels is getting his edge back because he was getting too "good."

Mike Malesev: Eddie Guerrero, Sting, and Randy Savage. It was a tough year to pick babyfaces. All the good guys seemed to play a tweener role except Eddie Guerrero.

Scott Druyan: Shawn Michaels as WWF Champion was given the ball and ran with it. A departure from previous champion Bret Hart's business-like approach, Michaels's flamboyancy was over with the fans and popped many houses.

7. Best Feud

WWF vs. WCW

1. WWF vs. WCW (Vince McMahon vs. Eric Bischoff) (18%)

2. Sandman vs. Raven (15%)

3. NWO vs. WCW (14%)

4. Undertaker vs. Mankind (10%)

5. Eliminators vs. Gangstas (8%)

6-10. Bret Hart vs. Shawn

Michaels, Bret Hart vs. Steve

Austin, Shane Douglas vs. Pitbulls,

Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Dean Malenko,

Sabu vs. Rob Van Dam

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Raven vs. Dreamer, Malenko vs. Guerrero, Public Enemy vs. Gangstas

1994: Bret vs. Owen, Flair vs. Hogan, Michaels vs. Ramon

1993: Bret vs. Lawler, Cactus vs. Vader, Sting vs. Vader

1992: Flair vs. Savage, Moondogs vs. Lawler & Jarrett, Vader vs. Sting

1991: Eddie Gilbert vs. Cactus Jack, Flair vs. Hogan, Sting vs. Cactus

1990: Nasty Boys vs. Steiners, Flair vs. Sting, Jerry Lawler vs. Eddie Gilbert

1989: Flair vs. Terry Funk, Flair vs. Steamboat, Hogan vs. Savage

1988: Savage vs. Ted DiBiase, Fantastics vs. Midnight Express, Jake Roberts vs. Rick Rude

Dylan Hayes: Brian Lee and Tommy Dreamer fell through tables, brawled through open streets and in people's backyards, and wrestled on rickety scaffolds and dumpsters. Douglas vs. Pitbulls has been a good feud based on psychology. The Eliminators vs. Gangstas produced the most weapons and blade jobs of the year.

Kimberly Redin: The WCW-NWO feud was the best, but Flair vs. Savage deserves recognition for second place. It was an

interesting and shocking continuation of the feud from the WWF days.

Jason Amari: Their controversial Wrestlemania match was just the beginning of the epic Shawn vs. Bret feud. Bret represents a no-nonsense, "old fashioned" attitude opposed to Shawn's glitzy entrance, dancing, and playing to the women in the crowd. This feud gave both Hart and Michaels the opportunity deliver terrific interviews.

Roland Millsaps Jr.: McMahon vs. Bischoff has one thing over everyone else. It's for real!

Chuck Kaye: Michaels vs. Bret because they seemed like they genuinely disliked each other. McMahon vs. Bischoff gets second for the same reasons. Undertaker vs. Mankind gets third because it was an Undertaker feud that actually kept my interest. Thank you, Mr. Foley.

John Siska: Raven vs. Sandman was the best of ECW's top feuds. Raven stole Sandman's son and title, which led to numerous hardcore battles, the best of which was on Dec. 7 when Raven regained the title from Sandman in a barbed wire match, the title Richards lost for him earlier. The Eliminators vs. Gangstas and Douglas vs. everybody get second and third.

Bob Nichnadowicz: The WCW vs. NWO feud led to the biggest change in wrestling in 15 years. Hulk Hogan turning his back on the fans is something that will be talked about 30 years from now. Who would have thought that the Undertaker was capable of having matches that good against Mankind. Raven and Co. vs. The Sandman was intriguing with Sandman's wife and kid turning against him, something I don't recall seeing previously.

John Molinaro: Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Dean Malenko was the best. No other feud captured the imagination of wrestling fans in 1996 as much as this one. These two superstars put on a clinic much in the same way that Malenko and Guerrero did a year earlier. By combining aspects of the American style, Japanese style, and lucha libre, Rey Jr. and Malenko got across compelling storylines night after night.

Chris Bernes: Vince McMahon vs. Eric Bischoff was more interesting than any storyline feud in 1996, bar none.

Pat & Dan Enright: The Lord Steven Regal and David Finlay (Belfast Bruiser) feud was one of wrestling's best kept secrets, lost in WCW's turmoil such as the main event at Uncensored, and the Loose Cannon angle, these two had some of the stiffest, most brutal and insane matches of

the year. Unfortunately not even their match at Uncensored could save the card from being a joke. Their match in the marking lot on Nitro in May was a great match. Here's hoping Finlay comes back to WCW.

Jeff Wyatt: The WWF-WCW feud seems to get even more intense each day. The winners are the fans because competition makes everything better.

Scott Hughes: How could anything, but the NWO vs. WCW be first. Even though it's losing some steam, I'm sure it will heat back up.

Phil Pisano: The first is WCW vs. WWF. The war between the big two has WCW ahead on Monday nights, but behind the WWF on pay-per-views—1997 should be good.

Fareed Barash: I thought Undertaker vs. Mankind was a very intense feud. It had good chairshots and hellacious bumps. I loved the Raven vs. Sandman feud with Tyler, Laurie Fullington, and the entire family storyline.

Ted Bauer: The Pitbulls vs. Shane Douglas brought Douglas back to the heel we all knew him to be, a much needed change from the deary days of Dean Douglas. The interviews and in-ring action, along with the angles, were all top-notch. Second goes to Gangstas vs. Eliminators. It made the Gangstas ECW's "bad boy" franchise team and brought The Eliminators to a new level of respect from ECW fans.

James Zordani: I may be in the minority on this one, but I've really enjoyed the Chris Benoit vs. Kevin Sullivan feud. Benoit has developed a persona in this feud that he hasn't had thus far in his career. One of the best things about this feud is that you don't know how it will end. In wrestling, that is refreshing. Raven and Sandman have engaged in an old fashioned blood and guts feud. Raven has used his mind games to get the better of the Sandman in most instances. Sometimes this feud has gone too far in its storylines, but I've still enjoyed it because it keeps me guessing, "What next?" The Gangstas vs. Eliminators gets my vote for third place, thanks mostly due to the work of Perry Saturn, one of wrestling's most underrated stars.

Gary Shirker: NWO vs. WCW is the top feud to date due to putting WCW on top of the promotion race. It always seems like they never run out of ideas to twist the plot. Raven vs. Sandman was an interesting storyline using Tyler, but the feud was way too drawn out. Eliminators vs. Gangstas gets third, but as seems to be a habit in ECW, there was no good ending or even an attempt at one.

8. Most Valuable Tag Team (MVT)

The Eliminators

1. The Eliminators (25%)
2. British Bulldog & Owen Hart (24%)
3. Outsiders (22%)
4. Harlem Heat (10%)
5. The Gangstas (8%)

6-10) Doug Furnas & Phil Lafon, Steiners. Rob Van Dam & Sabu, Public Enemy, Barbarian & Meng

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: The Public Enemy, Harlem Heat, Smoking Gunns
1994: TPE, Nastys, Eddie Guerrero & Art Barr
1993: Heavenly Bodies, Hollywood Blondes, Steiners
1992: Steve Williams & Terry Gordy, Steiners, Arn Anderson & Bobby Eaton
1991: Steiners, Anderson & Larry Zbyszko, The Rockers
1990: Steiners, Midnight Express, Ron Simmons & Butch Reed
1989: Anderson & Tully Blanchard, Rockers, Road Warriors
1988: Midnight Express, Fantastics, Road Warriors

Aaron Simmons: The Eliminators are on their way to becoming the greatest tag team of all time. Their wide array of moves is topped by no one and their finisher, Total Elimination, is the best in the sport. Harlem Heat get second because they were the only tag team in the big two worth a damn. The Gangstas get third for feuding with The Eliminators, which made for great matches, exciting brawls, and top notch interviews.

Bryan Meyers: The Gangstas' matches were always the highlight of the ECW Arena shows. They had the best and bloodiest brawls of any team. They were also one of the only teams to truly get over during the year. Harlem Heat were the best working team of any in the big two. They were one of the only teams able to be as cool as Hall & Nash. The Godwinns get third.

Annette Boyer: Without a doubt the best tag team in wrestling this year were The Eliminators. They had the best tag finisher and the feuding with my second choice, the Gangstas, didn't hurt either.

new Jack and Mustafa, for the most part, justified a title reign this year. Owen & Bulldog are a perfect fit and take the third spot.

Richard Zach: Aside from ECW, do the big two really have a tag team division? No, the Godwinns don't count.

Steve Watson: The Gangstas took over for Public Enemy as the Kings of Violence and they played their roles of Kings of Violence well. Their matches and interviews propelled them to great popularity as they led ECW's tag team division. The Eliminators were the backbone of ECW's tag teams with matches against the Gangstas, Pitbulls, and Sabu & Van Dam. They worked hard and earned their right as second best team of the year. Bulldog & Owen Hart brought new life to the bleak WWF tag team scene.

Pat Radice: The Eliminators had everything most other teams didn't—good matches, good heat, and good interviews.

Rob Mansfield: The Outsiders rocked the boat upon arrival in WCW. Vince McMahon should have paired up Hall and Nash.

Eric Krol: Where have all the good teams gone? No team really draws money anymore.

Jeffrey Cohen: Hall & Nash are good on the mic, but their in-ring performances were hampered by lackluster opponents (Faces of Fear, Nasty Boys).

Jason Williams: The whole tag team picture is just crap. I give the nod to Harlem Heat because they were together the entire year and were fairly consistent.

Patrick McNeill: The Eliminators are the best tag team on this continent. Too cool to be heels, too vicious to be straight babyfaces, and too damn talented to be with Titan or Turner. With the exception of their feud with The Gangstas, every ECW Arena match they were in exceeded the hype. Public who? Bulldog & Owen were the premiere tag team in the Big Two. Breaking them up will be a huge mistake, but Vince has made plenty of mistakes on the tag team side. PG13 managed to hold the USWA together and I've love to see them actually wrestle in the WWF.

D. Scott Bergantz: Remember when Harlem Heat first burst onto the WCW scene? Talk about your overhaul. Booker T and Stevie Ray have come a long way since the GWF. Booker T has especially improved.

Doug Gruener: Tag teams were once again a weak link of all promotions in the United States

this year. Hopefully the WWF's acquisition of LaFon & Furnas will help to remedy the situation in 1997. The Eliminators get first because they suck less than the others.

Chris Kelly: I would assume that the big two would love to get the Eliminators who have the best finisher in years.

Mike McCullough: Owen & Bulldog gave instant credibility to the WWF whose tag team roster has never been weaker.

Henrik Rautila: Harlem Heat was the best team in 1996. They had great matches against Hall & Nash and the Steiners, with Booker T as the star of the matches.

Harry Simon: The Gangstas and The Eliminators were the only teams this year that both (a) remained a team and (b) held anybody's interest. But Saturn & Kronus are light years ahead of New Jack & Mustafa (and every other team in the country, for that matter) in terms of pure athleticism. Harlem Heat get number three for Booker T's always improving workrate.

Mark Marrone: The Eliminators, with their unique and devastating maneuvers, make them the best team this year. Owen & Bulldog have the potential to go down as one of the best teams ever if they would stick together.

Mark Black: There weren't a lot of teams in the U.S. that were really all that good. If I had to pick, I'd pick Furnas & Kroffat. They had great matches with Sabu & Van Dam in ECW. Second goes to Sabu & Van Dam. Great flying time and a good streak of matches in ECW. Third goes to the Gangstas. Even though their work in the ring is bad, they were great brawlers and have great charisma.

Robert O'Connor: The Eliminators were unquestionably the best tag team in North America in 1996. Their unique and innovative moves were fun to watch. The Gangstas were always entertaining. There's nothing quite like the sight of New Jack storming the ring with a trash can full of bizarre "weapons." Owen Hart & British Bulldog had some good, solid bouts.

Tim Cobb: Hall & Nash, not because they were terrific, but because there were no other tag teams doing anything in pro wrestling in '96. Let's hope there is a change in '97.

David Frey: The Outsiders blew everyone else away. Not only is their ring work (including psychology) superior, but they are the best commentators in the business (even when wrestling). They are the real "Total Package."

9. Best Brawler

Mankind

1. Mankind (29%)
2. Tommy Dreamer (22%)
3. Sandman (18%)
4. Gangasts (14%)
5. Raven (12%)

6-10) Steve Austin, Sabu, Chris Benoit, Terry Funk, Undertaker

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Cactus Jack (alias Mankind), Sandman, The Public Enemy

1994: Cactus Jack, Sabu, Vader

1993: Cactus, Vader, Terry Funk

1992: Cactus, Eddie Gilbert, Moondogs

1991: Cactus, Gibert, Stan Hansen

Chris Cressman: This award should just be re-named the ECW Award because as long as ECW exists, the best brawlers are going to be coming from there. Raven wins, followed by Sandman and Tommy Dreamer.

Rodet Etienne: Hall & Nash deserve this honor for, if nothing else, helping Nitro smash Raw every week.

Edezal Carr: Mankind looks dangerous and wrestles that way. His stunts and bumps made him the WWF's most hardcore superstar.

John Siska: Mankind took Shawn Michaels to the Extreme in Philadelphia at September's IYH. He took one hell of a bump off the ladder in the Boiler Room Brawl at SummerSlam. And at King of the Ring he took Undertaker to one of the best performances I have ever seen by the Undertaker. Not a dull moment all year long by the former Cactus Jack. Even when his matches weren't all that spectacular, you could always count on those one or two hard bumps by him.

Mike Wenrich: Hardcore, hardcore, hardcore. Tommy Dreamer is just so hardcore.

Jason Husby: By any name, Mick Foley is still the most intelligent brawler in wrestling. Mankind places first for great brawls with Undertaker. Sandman places second. Brawl is all he does and does it well. Sabu gets third for being able to add aerial aspects to his brawling.

Marshall Goldberg: Does Tommy Dreamer have any blood left?

Scott Druyan: Steve Austin, after a short ECW run, came to the WWF where he has truly shown himself to be one of the very best in the world. Austin doesn't care who he's in the ring with. He'd

just as soon knock the teeth out of his own grandmother.

Bob Nichnadowicz: I didn't think he'd win this award this year when he joined the WWF, but Mankind didn't miss a beat. The only other wrestlers you can consider are those in ECW. Tommy Dreamer gets second for constantly putting his body on the line. The Gangstas get third because brawling is all they do.

Brian Yursha: Mankind gets first because he is an amazing brawler and he takes some of the best bumps in wrestling. He did a great job against Shawn Michaels at the In Your House event in Philadelphia. He also had some exciting matches against The Undertaker. Sabu gets second. He was great in all of his matches, especially against Rob Van Dam. Tommy Dreamer gets third as he took some amazing bumps off of tables in the ECW Arena.

Chris Bernes: Sandman and Raven set the standard in '96 with Sandman getting the edge for the win. Mankind lost a bit by joining the WWF.

Fareed Barash: I thought Mankind was the best brawler. He took unbelievable bumps and his match against Undertaker in the Boiler Room brawl was superb. Cactus Jack may be dead, but Mankind is alive and taking great bumps.

Ted Bauer: Raven was the best heel of 1995, but with the emergence of Shane Douglas in ECW, and with other factors, he also became the best brawler. His matches were continually stiff and entertaining, a quality most "Big Two" brawlers lack. The Sandman gets no 2. He was often the one brawling with Raven as their feud went along. His overall package has increased from 1994 and 1995 when he was mainly a brawler, so he can't get number one. Mankind gets no. 3 for being the best of the national promotions all year.

Jim Zordani: Even though I don't like the Mankind gimmick, Mick Foley still gets my vote for best brawler. He was at the top of his game against Michaels at Mindgames and carried the Undertaker to several decent matches. Raven gets second for abusing his body throughout the year in ECW. The Gangstas get third. As the year went on, I grew tired of seeing them, though. How many times can you see a chairshot.

Dylan Hales: Mankind wins, but boy does he stick out like a sore thumb in the WWF. Brian Lee has been great in ECW as have The Gangstas, but the trash can has gotta go. Honorable mention to Tommy Dreamer.

Jason Amari: Mankind had no regard for his own well-being and takes bumps better than

anyone in the business. He proved this against Shawn Michaels and plenty of times against Undertaker. Pitbull2 and Chris Benoit follow.

Chuck Kaye: Mankind, Sandman, and Tommy Dreamer. One word for my top three: Unselfishness.

Eric McHugh: The Gangstas just tore apart place after place and body after body, including their own in nothing but brawls everywhere they went. Tommy Dreamer can turn eggs, coffee makers, Nintendos, and freakin' the whole outdoors into weapons. But he couldn't use the outdoors without no. 34, Brian Lee. Lee finally reached the stars in 1996. Honorable mention to, of all people Lord Steven Regal, for his parking lot brawl with David Finlay and his Christmas party run-in with Van Hammer.

Gary Shirker: New Jack will use anything and take any shot. For whatever reason, he loves to bleed. Tommy Dreamer is second because he's a fool who likes getting nearly maimed for life in order to get over. Why anyone would take what he does is beyond me.

Scott Hughes: Regardless of the name change, Mankind is the only person you could even consider for this. He even brought his all-time bumping ability to the front of the pack against the Undertaker for truly classic battles in the art of brawling. Bruiser Brody must be smiling in heaven.

Laurie Webber: Mankind in the WWF has carried the legend of his Cactus Jack routine from ECW with him, and it works great.

Pat Radice: The Sandman brawled everywhere and with Cactus Jack out of ECW, he stood out as no. 1.

Greg Pelfrey: Mankind is a great brawler. He can take hard hits and give them. He is just a good and realistic looking wrestler. Sandman and Raven can brawl as well as anyone.

Steven Watson: The Sandman roared into 1996 with some great brawls with Raven, The Bruise Brothers, and Shane Douglas. Tommy Dreamer did nothing but brawl this year and he had some memorable matches with Brian Lee. Brian Lee came into his own as a pretty tough brawler this year with matches with Tommy Dreamer that were hardcore action at their best.

Annette Boyers: The Gangstas and their trash can full of weapons automatically qualifies them as the best brawlers. Mankind brought his brand of mayhem to the WWF to mostly positive reviews. Tommy Dreamer's middle name should be brawling because it's all he does.

10. Best Aerial Wrestler

1. Rey Misterio Jr. (36%)
2. Too Cold Scorpio (20%)
3. Sabu (13%)
4. Ultimo Dragon (9%)
5. Juventud Guerrera (9%)
- 6-10) Psicosis, Marc Mero, Rob Van Dam, Eddie Guerrero, Flyboy Rocco Rock

PAST WINNERS:

- 1993: Rey Misterio Jr. Sabu, Eddie Guerrero**
1994: Sabu, Rey Jr., Scorpio
1995: Scorpio, 1-2-3 Kid, Sabu
1996: Jushin Liger, Brian Pillman, Lightning Kid (Sean Waltman)
1997: Liger, Pillman Lightning Kid

Bill DeRosier: Every time Sabu goes up in the air, I gasp.

Jason Williams: How is Rey Misterio Jr. still alive? I just cannot believe the things that this man is capable of. He is just awesome. He should wear Piper's no fear shirt to the ring because he really does live it.

Dave Moore: Sabu has no equal. Number four would go to Beulah.

Tom Ferreira: Misterio continues to amaze with his highspots in match after match, but Too Cold Scorpio has the potential given the right opponents to work with to be one of the all-time great high flyers.

Patrick McNeill: A spectacular year in this category, which will probably be followed by another spectacular year in 1997. There wasn't much difference between the top three.

D. Scott Bergantz: Rey Misterio Jr. is tops. Michael Jordan can't hold a candle to Rey Misterio Jr. This guy can fly! He's also an exceptional mat technician. The only wrestler who can be put on Rey Jr.'s level would be the legendary Tiger Mask. All other grapplers are good, but Misterio and Tiger Mask are in a class by themselves.

Chris Kelly: Rey Misterio Jr. should be dead by the age of 28 at the rate he flies now.

Seth Berger: This category may seem a little suspect because nowadays too many wrestlers do highspots for the sake of doing highspots. That's what dropped Misterio on my list. Too Cold Scorpio does aerialism the best way and that's

Rey Misterio Jr.

when it's thrown in subtly and effectively. Rey Misterio Jr. still gets my second place pick because I can't feasibly understand how he can still be doing those moves after eight years. Ultimo Dragon gets number three because I see new stuff from him that can't be bought if another wrestler tried it himself.

Henrik Rautila: Rey Misterio Jr. is the best high flyer in the world. He continues to revolutionize the business by inventing new, more dangerous, excellently worked moves for every match. Psicosis gets second for his great moves in his matches against Rey Jr. Eddie Guerrero is a great worker in addition to his highspot ability.

Jim Cobb: This should be renamed the Rey Misterio Jr. category. 'Nuff said.

Bob Nychnadowicz: Rey Misterio Jr. has no real competition. He's too innovative and fluid. He has the rare ability to adjust in mid-air if his planned move isn't going to come off and change it into a different maneuver. Psicosis lives up to his name with his psychotic bumps. Too Cold may be the most underrated flyer around.

Brian Yursha: Rey Misterio Jr. is the best. He is always thinking of new incredible aerial maneuvers in his matches. He is amazing. His matches against Psicosis and Juventud Guerrera were classics. Psicosis is my next choice. He did some incredible aerial maneuvers against Rey Jr. at the Bash at the Beach and it was definitely a match of the year candidate. Flash Funk gets third as some of his aerial maneuvers are just incredible. His aerial maneuvers are very innovative.

John Molinaro: Rey Misterio Jr. This one is a no brainer. Rey Jr. is the most brilliant aerial artist of our time. If the aerial style of wrestling can be considered an art form, then Rey Jr. is using fine oils and all the others merely water colours. He simply defies description.

Chris Bernes: Misterio amazed everyone, and even helped me convert a borderline fan into a true follower. Benoit can still fly. Mero is showing flashes of aerial brilliance, but misses too many spots.

Ted Bauer: Rey Misterio Jr. was the best aerial wrestler of 1996. His tactics enthralled the masses and often highlighted a strong WCW undercard. Liger gets no. 2. He didn't wrestle in the United States as much as he did in past years, but when he did, he might have been better than Misterio. Observe his match at Starrcade, perhaps a letdown because of time, but look at the moves he packed into 20 minutes. No. 3 goes

to Mero, whose aerial regime became more diversified in 1996, especially with the Shooting Star Press. He injected some excitement into WWF cards.

Jim Zordani: Rey Misterio Jr. in a landslide. Rey Jr. consistently wows me with his kamikaze aerial maneuvers. Misterio has the quickest frankensteiner in the business and his topes, hurricanranas, and planchas are second to none. Ultimo Dragon gets second. While he doesn't do too many flying moves these days, he knows when to do them. His Asai moonsault against Dean Malenko at Starrcade was incredible. Dragon is great and I look forward to seeing him in WCW during 1997. If only he could lose Sonny Onno.

Dylan Hales: Rey Misterio Jr. continues to dominate this division as he is head and shoulders above the others. Funk is phenomenal for his size and is probably the most creative wrestler in the world. Mero has improved vastly in his category and uses aerial moves that very few others do (BTS Bodyblock and Shooting Star Press). Honorable mention to Sabu, Juventud Guerrera, Ultimo Dragon, Chris Jericho, and Devon Storm.

Jason Amari: Shawn Michaels has the best looking moonsault in the business, not to mention a better flying elbow than Randy Savage. Marc Mero also lit up the skies in the WWF. Rey Misterio Jr. is unbelievable in the ring, but it seems to judge him against people that outweigh him by more than 100 pounds.

Eric McHugh: Rey Misterio Jr. just causes jaws to drop everywhere he goes. He's beyond belief. While Misterio is graceful, Sabu is reckless, and just as awe-inspiring. Juventud Guerrera might be the second best Mexican-style aerialist that exists.

Gary Shirker: Rey Misterio Jr. has taken flying to a new level and I'm glad to finally be able to watch him on TV. Sabu continues to do things to top himself. I have to wonder what he'll do to top himself next.

Scott Hughes: The moves Rey Misterio Jr. does are so unbelievable that if you blink during one of his matches you are sure to miss something. Rey has redefined the aerial aspect of wrestling to a truly new level.

Aaron Simmons: Flash Funk is the best. Rey Jr. may do more wild moves, but Flash's moves always look smooth. Rey Misterio Jr. gets second for the variety of his aerial attack. Sabu is nuts and gets third for all of his craziness. An honorable mention goes to New Jack's insane dive onto D-Von Dudley at ECW Arena.

II. Best Major Live Event

Wrestlemania XII

1. **Wrestlemania XII** (18%)
2. **Starrcade '96** (15%)
3. **Great American Bash** (14%)
4. **Survivor Series** (12%)
5. **Bash at the Beach** (6%)

6-10) King of the Ring, November to Remember, Royal Rumble, SummerSlam, World Wrestling Peace Festival

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: SummerSlam, Starrcade, Survivor Series
 1994: Wrestlemania X, AAA When World's Collide, Spring Stampede
 1993: SuperBrawl I, King of the Ring, SummerSlam
 1992: Royal Rumble, Wrestlemania VIII, SuperBrawl II
 1991: WrestleWar '91, SuperBrawl I, WCW Japan Supershow
 1990: Great American Bash, Wrestlemania VI, Starrcade
 1989: Great American Bash, WrestleWar, WCW Chi-Town Rumble

Steven Watson: ECW's Big Ass Extreme Bash on Mar. 9 had everything—the match of the year in Misterio vs. Guerrero, a brutal three way dance, and Cactus Jack's ECW Farewell, which was an excellent match with Mikey Whipwreck. Starrcade came out as a surprising event with Hulk Hogan and Giant finally doing jobs. WCW actually beat the NWO! Plus it had those great cruiserweight matches and the christening of Eddie Guerrero as U.S. Champ. It was truly a compelling event. Wrestlemania XII had the most solid action of all the PPVs and told a great story, but the main event fell below expectations, which kept it from being number one.

Allan Greenberg: Survivor Series featured so many new stars, the return of Bret Hart, and a title change. Wrestlemania was promoted better than many of the other "extravaganzas," celebrities

need not apply. Starrcade was an example of WCW doing something right. Call the paper.

Pat Radice: Survivor Series had good debuts of Furnas & LaFon, Flash Funk, and Rocky. The Bret vs. Austin match was just incredible.

Chris Cressman: ECW Heat Wave '96 takes first for their awesome four-man TV Title match. Survivor Series is second just for the sight of Sid being crowned WWF Champion. Who woulda thunk it? Starrcade is third based on the atmosphere surrounding Piper vs. Hogan.

John Siska: I didn't think WCW or the WWF gave us one event that stood out, but almost every ECW Arena show was one of those, and it was hard to pick a Top 3. November to Remember gets first. The first Taz vs. Sabu confrontation, return of the Legend Terry Funk, a 30 minute draw between The Eliminators and Van Dam & Sabu. Second goes to Hardcore Heaven on June 22. The ring broke and on top of that Van Dam and Sabu wrestled each other in a broken ring while injured in an unbearable 100-plus degree building. Third goes to Heat Wave on July 13 featuring the debut of Louie Spicolli, Douglas winning the four-man elimination match to win the TV Title, Francine's turn, and the Rage of the Cage six-man main event. ECW gave us all that the Big Two couldn't in '96. No surprise there.

Gary Miller: I had the time of my life watching Bash at the Beach live in the front row. The Hogan heel turn made the event a classic.

Mike Wenrich: The Great American Bash was the best pay-per-view for three reasons. One, there was some superb wrestling on the card. Two, seeing Bischoff jackknifed through a stage will always be memorable. The third, and perhaps the most important, reason, nobody had seen a bald-headed, egomaniacal, overrated musclehead there to ruin the event.

Abdul Malik Sani: Survivor Series gets third place due to the long anticipated return of Bret Hart and the great match he had with Steve Austin. Second goes to Wrestlemania 12 for the return of the Ultimate Warrior and two "dream" matches—Undertaker vs. Diesel and Bret vs. Michaels. The 60 minute Iron Man challenge was a tremendous classic. The lack of pinfalls seemed like a bad idea at first, but after watching it over, it actually enhanced the match-up. First place goes to Fall Brawl. There were many good-to-great matches like Page vs. Guerrero, Konnan vs. Guerrero, Calo vs. Misterio Jr. and Benoit vs. Jericho. The Giant vs. Savage match wasn't that bad, either; but the Sting angle and the anticipation behind it was the real highlight of the show.

Andy MacConney: The return of Bret Hart, a match of a lifetime between Bret and Austin, a WWF Title change, and the debuts of Furnas, LaFon, Rocky, and Funk—who could ask for anything more. Two extremely hot and surprising angles made the Bash a great card.

Betty Schaffer: I attended the Great American Bash. The images of the Bischoff powerbomb, Sullivan and Benoit brawling up the aisle, and McMichael becoming a Horsemen all added up to a memorable pay-per-view.

Pete Houston: King of the Ring was a good pay-per-view from start to finish. Not a crappy match on the card. Bulldog vs. Michaels was great.

Eric Krol: After years of pay-per-view snoozefests, WCW finally put on a string of entertaining shows this year, save for Hog Wild.

Bill DeRosier: November to Remember was the best night of wrestling anywhere.

Jason Williams: WCW had their two best pay-per-views in the history of their company in 1996. Bash at the Beach beats out Great American Bash slightly because of the Hogan angle. Both pay-per-views had great workrate.

Dave Moore: All the major pay-per-views sucked. That leaves ECW in 1997. Even a USWA pay-per-view would be a step up from the WWF and WCW.

Chris Kelly: Survivor Series was carried by a great Austin vs. Bret match and Michaels really carried Sid in a match with shocking fan reaction.

Seth Berget: ECW's A Matter of Respect is how I hoped the PPV would turn out if it ever comes through. The worst match still got three-and-a-half stars from me. It had three four-to-five star matches, a fantastic three-way between Raven, Sandman, and Pitbull2, Sabu doing a job to get over Rob Van Dam, and my match of the year as Shane Douglas learns to respect the ECW Title and Scorpio by defeating him for the TV belt. ECW should show more tapes like this to get over to an unknowing audience.

Scott D Bergantz: Great American Bash was the final nail in the WWF's coffin. This truly established WCW as the premier organization in the U.S. Eric Bischoff and Co. have done one helluva job in getting WCW on track. The Bash was an event that was the turning point. Anybody who saw it can't deny the momentum transpiring. Even though not all the matches were world class, the WCW was creative and entertaining.

12. Manager of the Year

1. Sunny (18%)
2. Jim Cornette (17%)
3. Woman (12%)
4. Clarence Mason (10%)
5. Bill Alfonso (8%)
- 6-10 Ted DiBiase, Marlena, Jimmy Hart, Francine, Sherri

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: Jim Cornette, Woman, Sunny
1994: Paul E. Dangerously, Cornette, DiBiase
1993: Cornette, Tammy Fytch, Dangerously
1992: Dangerously, Cornette, Ron Wright
1991: Dangerously Sherri, Paul Bearer
1990: Cornette, Bobby Heenan, Sherri
1989: Cornette, Heenan, Dangerously
1988: Cornette, Dangerously, Heenan

Henrik Rautila: Sunny is a given. She gets more chants than anyone in the WWF. Jim Cornette is great as long as he isn't in the ring. Bill Alfonso is a great heel manager, also.

Howie Crumit: Sunny, Sable, Marlena. That's good enough for me.

Bob Nichnadowicz: Managers mean as much today as tag teams do. Bill Alfonso is easily the best, distantly followed by Sunny and Jim Cornette.

Al Galdi: Woman takes her role as a seriously as anyone in the business. She gives a consistent interview, has great facial expressions, and provides those gut-wrenching screeches in the middle of matches. No one can excite a crowd quite like Sunny. I wish they would stop trying to make her into the female version of Jim Cornette, though. Jimmy Hart took some bumps and brought credibility to people like the Faces of Fear and Konnan.

Brian Yursha: Jim Cornette gets number one because he was great at ringside when he was managing Vader and British Bulldog & Owen Hart. Sunny gets second as she had great heat managing a lot of different tag teams. Ted

Sunny

DiBiase gets third. He was a good choice to be the manager of the NWO.

Ted Bauer: Sunny was the only WWF manager of note, and a great deal of noting at that. During virtually every Hog Farmer vs. New Rockers match, fans would start a Sunny chant. She dominated the entire tag scene. Debra McMichael gets no. 2. She really, really came into her own as the year winded down becoming perhaps the best interview in WCW, even more so than Flair. She added a great deal to her husband's dim-wit personality. Missy Hyatt gets third. She added a great deal of heat to Sandman's matches during this year and proved a worthy topic for Richards to joke about. 'Woman' dominated this category.

Jim Zordani: Bill Alfonso successfully made the transition from heel referee to manager in 1996. Fonzie can be very annoying with that whistle but is great in drawing heat for his man Taz. Ted DiBiase has been a much more effective manager in WCW than in the WWF. DiBiase employs a great psychology as a manager knowing when to do things at the right time. Now only if the NWO could fire the Hulkster. Jim Cornette was a very effective manager during the first half of 1996. No one else seems deserving, so he gets the spot by default.

Dylan Hayes: Alfonso knows his role is to piss off the crowd and he does it well. Woman and Sunny get spots due to the heat from crowds. Honorable mention: Jim Cornette.

Kimberly Redin: Sunny gets this award hands down for the push she received in the WWF. She does appear more charismatic when the cameras are on. During house shows she just seemed to go through the motions. Woman gets no. 2 even though she's the home town gal in my neck of the woods.

Jason Amari: Sunny kept the tag team scene interesting through most of 1996. I'm glad to see they had her and Faarooq split because they didn't seem compatible.

Eric McHugh: Managers continue to be a dying breed. Bill Alfonso gets the win, however, for going completely over-the-top with Taz and taking some really vicious hits. The women of ECW, except Kimona, get second for doing more as "valets" or whatever they were than all other managers in the sport do anymore. I mean, Beulah and Francine take some hellacious bumps. Third goes to Sunny, who can't commentator for beans, but is a goodwill ambassador for the WWF and really seems to enjoy herself.

Aaron Simmons: Bill Alfonso is the top manager. Fonzie pisses the crowd off and is one of the most entertaining characters around. His energy level is unsurpassed. Sunny is second for carrying the WWF's tag team division throughout the year. Cornette, Lawler, Mr. Perfect, and McMahon all got their puns in about her, but I don't want to be like those boobs, so I'll just move on to my third pick. Francine did a great job this year and took harder bumps than any male in WCW. She has a very bright future and it should be fun to watch her and the Franchise do their thing in '97.

Steven Watson: Jim Cornette stayed in step with the audiences and got his men over as heels effectively. Bill Alfonso managed only Taz but was still able to generate tremendous heat during a Taz match and was great on interviews with Taz. Sunny provided something worth watching rather than the regular boring tag team crap of the WWF.

Annette Boyer: Bill Alfonso is annoying to no end, but his pairing with Taz is so unlikely, they are perfect together. Clarence Mason has so much potential. Sunny was over no matter whom she was paired with.

Pat Radice: Compared to everyone else, Clarence Mason was the best. That's not saying much.

Jesus Cortez Jr.: Managers are a worthless bunch, so if I had to pick out one above all else, Francine gets the gold for taking some great bumps and getting plenty of heat.

Jason Smith: Sunny managed three tag champions consecutively due to her marketability, and her outrageous popularity with the male contingent of the fans. Woman was easily the most believable manager in wrestling, taking everything seriously, while managing the great Four Horsemen. Ted DiBiase seemed to be in the doghouse in the WWF, but he is again in the thick of everything managing the champions of the NWO.

Chris Cressman: Bill Alfonso was the only manager this year that did what he was supposed to do. He got his wrestlers over, was entertaining to watch, and he pissed off the fans while blowing that whistle at ringside. No one else did that to the extent that Alfonso did.

Jason Martinez: Clarence Mason was fresh and interesting in various angles. It also would seem to most fans he changed Faarooq's original silly cartoon persona into a more serious and focused dangerous heel. Mason stealing Owen & Bulldog from Cornette was great stuff, too.

13. Best Broadcaster

Jim Ross

1. Jim Ross (35%)
2. Joey Styles (25%)
3. Mike Tenay (12%)
4. Jerry Lawler (12%)
5. Vince McMahon (8%)

6-10) Bobby Heenan, Tony Schiavone, Kevin Kelly, Eric Bischoff, Larry Zbyszko

PAST WINNERS:

1995: Styles, Lawler, Ross

1994: Heenan, Ross, McMahon

1993: Heenan, Ross, McMahon

1992: Ross, Heenan, Schiavone

(Before 1992, announcers and color commentators were separated)

Announcer of the Year:

1991: Ross, Schiavone, McMahon

1990: Ross, Schiavone, McMahon

1989: Ross, Schiavone, Lance

Russell

1988: Ross, Jesse Ventura, Russell

Color Commentator of the Year:

1991: Heenan, Paul E. Dangerously,

Scott "The Body" Anthony (Levy)

1990: Ventura, Dangerously, Roddy

Piper

1989: Ventura, Cornette, Michael

Hayes

John Siska: Joey Styles kept me laughing all year long. The man is even more hilarious when you meet him in person. He has the quickest wit in wrestling and his constant barrage of insults toward WCW and the WWF led to some very interesting vignettes by ECW wrestlers.

Mike Wenrich: Mike Tenay, unlike other WCW announcers, does his best to talk about the action in the ring. Whenever Rey Jr. and Psicosis come on, he sounds very enthused and into the match. He's very smart when it comes to lucha style wrestling. He knows all their moves and their backgrounds. The Super Calo story he told recently is interesting. Bobby Heenan is still funny, especially on the main event program. Jerry Lawler making fun of the babyfaces is still a treat.

Tim Dills: Mike Tenay is an alternative to most announcers. He comes across as credible in a world littered with Rhodesisms. Mean Gene

900-line come-ons, and outdated Brain references. Tenay also seemed to have some influence, at times, with other announcers especially Tony Schiavone. Joey Styles gets second because he is a perfect fit for ECW. Jim Ross takes third despite his silly "feud" with Vince McMahon.

Mark Underwood: Joey Styles—his 1930s "muckracker journalist" is unique and he works hard to tie the clips on ECW together into a coherent whole.

Chris Clark: Captain Bitterness Jim Ross was on fire in 1996, shooting and badmouthing his way to some excellent commentary. Second place goes to the King of the one liners, Jerry Lawler. He made me laugh loads more than Heenan did.

Chris DiRese: Jim Ross is finally a voice for all fans sick of the WWF's marketing gimmicks and cheesy wrestlers. Joey Styles was great all year. Vince will always be the voice associated with pro wrestler and lands the third spot.

Marshall Goldberg: Dusty Rhodes is the best announcer. Many fans make fun of him because of past transgressions as booker or his lack of being a great worker, but he has vast knowledge of its history and he passes it along in a funny and entertaining way. He also has chemistry with every announcers he worked with and he doesn't try to force his jokes on the audience.

Scott Druyan: Joey Styles keep ECW a very entertaining weekly show. His wit and knowledge keeps all us hardcore fans chanting "Oh my God!."

Eric Krol: Vince McMahon allowing Jim Ross to shoot this year was one of the biggest surprises. Ross is good in his role. Bischoff is still poor as an announcer, but got over the NWO angle in a big, big way.

Bill DeRosier: Joey Styles is the funniest and most entertaining announcer in wrestling. Jerry Lawler has more one-liners than Wenny Youngman.

Dave Moore: Joey Styles has no equal in professional wrestling. Or probably all of professional sports.

Tom Ferreira: Jim Ross is still fun to listen to, even if his new disgruntled heel persona does tend to grate upon occasion. McMahon is familiar, sort of like a comfortable pair of underwear. In '97, Mike Tenay will be the best commentator in wrestling once he gets a little more comfortable behind the mic.

Patrick McNeill: Joey Styles, often imitated,

never duplicated. My only complaint with him was his occasional exaggerations. (No, Joey, Terry Gordy did not resurrect his career at Hardcore Heaven). The heel J.R. was a little more fun than the old J.R., but the biggest surprise was how little Ross changed once he "turned bad." Mike Tenay is a gem and I'll bet he doesn't miss working in radio. Honorable mention to Jerry Lawler for his comments about Jake Roberts this summer on Raw.

D. Scott Bergantz: Iron Mike Tenay was the best. There wasn't one announcer who would even qualify to plug in his microphone—not even Joey Styles.

Mike McCullough: Jim Ross continues to excel with his sarcasm and his calling moves by the rightful names puts him above anyone else in the WWF. Mike Tenay is always a pro and (like Ross) never talks down to the viewers. Kevin Kelly seemed a bit bland, but was trying, and always came across as eager.

Seth Berger: Mike Tenay finally got some air time and thus deserves number one for being able to treat the fan as someone interested in the history of the sport. All broadcasters should learn from him about calling the correct maneuvers and knowing about wrestlers instead of just saying, "He wears a mask, that must mean he's a freak." Jim Ross was always an excellent straight man, but now can tread over to insulting McMahon for his overbearing style. Jerry Lawler has two announcing jobs—sharing with people like Ross, McMahon, Dave Brown, Corey Maclin, and Lance Russell can only make one a whole lot better at timing, not to mention his natural quick wit.

Henrik Rautila: Mike Tenay has more knowledge of the business than all other WCW commentators combined. I just wish he wouldn't have Heenan by his side. Joey Styles, the voice of ECW, is a great broadcaster and could do better with a color commentator. Jim Ross is even better as a heel. He can humiliate McMahon and call a match.

David Goldberg: Jim Ross continued to be the best play-by-play man in the sport. His new style of honesty made him even better. Ross still calls the matches and every so often he will make a funny remark ripping on the WWF or taking a cheapshot at WCW. It is always classic when Ross and McMahon are in the broadcast booth together. It also helps make lackluster shows like WWF Superstars seem much more interesting.

Frank Van Alstine: Good old J.R. is truly the best broadcaster in wrestling. He is a throwback to my childhood days when wrestling seemed a lot more real and exotic, rather than a commercial for a pay-per-view.

14. Best Booker

1. Paul Heyman (42%)
2. Vince McMahon (40%)
3. Kevin Sullivan (6%)
4. Eric Bischoff (4%)
5. Jim Cornette (2%)
- 6-10) Randy Hales, Jim Ross, Jerry Lawler, WCW Committee, Tito Santana & Sgt. Slaughter (AWF)

PAST WINNERS:

- 1995: Heyman, McMahon, Cornette
1994: Heyman, McMahon, Antonio Pena
(Formerly "Promoter of the Year")
1993: Cornette, McMahon, Heyman
1992: Cornette, McMahon, Frey

Eric Krol: Paul Heyman kept ECW interesting despite talent defections and even switched to a face-heel style without skipping a beat. WCW's Kevin Sullivan and Eric Bischoff got over one of the best angles of all time with the NWO, but still appear to be booking by the seat of their pants. McMahon has a great top of the card but nothing underneath, and failed to get Mankind over.

Tim Cobb: Vince McMahon lost several top stars, but kept a solid roster and gave us a terrific series of pay-per-views.

Bob Nighnadowicz: Paul Heyman knows what his fans want and he gives it to them. Always expect the unexpected when you go to an ECW show.

Brian Yursha: Vince McMahon did a great job booking as he made Shawn Michaels the WWF Champion and gave Steve Austin a big push. He also gave us some classic matches like Austin vs. Bret and Michaels vs. Mankind. Paul Heyman gets second because he gave us great matches and he made the ECW TV show very entertaining. Kevin Sullivan gets third. There were some great matches from WCW such as Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis from the Bash.

Pat Radice: Paul Heyman managed to make something out of little in 1996.

Chris Clark: With so many rats jumping WWF ship, Vince McMahon still managed to put together an entertaining, exciting, and first-rate promotion. Paul Heyman kept doing a good job satisfying his cult following in Philly. And in third place, well back of the leader, is Hulk Hogan for finally turning heel when all else failed.

Chris Bernes: Paul Heyman has the industry making changes, and he remains the most

Paul Heyman

innovative. He is brilliant. McMahon may not be as good as he was, but he is still fabulous. Sullivan is showing signs that he may starting to get it right.

Fareed Barash: Paul Heyman is by far the best booker in all of wrestling, I bought a satellite dish and I see ECW ever week on SportsChannel Philadelphia. He shows he has the most creative mind in all of wrestling every week. He did mess up the Erich Kulas situation, but is still the best booker out there.

Ted Bauer: Paul Heyman once again gets no. 1. Another excellent year for him booking solid, gripping feuds. Meanwhile, Vince McMahon managed to keep his head above water with Michaels's reign, and his interesting multi-party feuds for the two singles titles near the end of the year. Sullivan gets no. 3. Despite the genius of the NWO angle, a booker should have the authority to tell Hogan to stop controlling the angle. He didn't and therein lies his weakness and the weakness of the promotion as a whole.

Jim Zordani: Paul Heyman is a very good booker at times. He can also be very erratic. For the most part though he does the best he can with what he has. Case in point, the Blue Meanie. Who else could make a likable character out of that guy? Kevin Sullivan and Eric Bischoff teamed up in WCW and turned WCW from unwatchable to enjoyable. No one else deserves a vote.

Jason Amari: Vince McMahon and the WWF aren't only surviving the talent losses all year, but it seems as if the angles right now are more intense and interesting than they have been in a long time. It appears that when the pressure is on McMahon to provide a more interesting product, he always accomplishes it. His character developments, especially Austin, are outdone by nobody.

Gary Shirker: Paul Heyman continually comes up with better storylines than anyone else. It only seems he doesn't have the blowoffs to feuds. Kevin Sullivan is second because of the NWO situation. Vince McMahon seems to have lost a lot of creativity, but did end the year strong.

Chris Cressman: Paul Heyman still has the magic touch. He knows how to utilize the talents of his wrestlers. He is not afraid to take chances. His TV show is still innovative. And as his wrestlers have said in interviews, he's honest with them. How many wrestlers have said that about Eric Bischoff or Vince McMahon.

Steven Watson: Paul Heyman provided the most interesting and exciting moments in wrestling this year. Even though he lost great talent (Scorpio, Jericho), he still brought in great talent (Spiccoli, Candido) to balance it out. Paul Heyman is a true

genius but will have to work three times as hard as he did this year to be successful next year (given the circumstances of ECW at the start of 1997). Vince McMahon gave the people the champions they loved this year (Michaels, Sid) and pulled off a miracle by making Sid a popular champion. McMahon may lose in the ratings, but not the overall product.

Scott Hughes: Eric Bischoff and Hulk Hogan get first. The NWO angle is pure genius and is finally paying off. Hogan turning heel and other defections are worth watching every Monday. The pure brashness is almost too much. But Uncle Eric is a mark for his own product which will eventually be the downfall. I see Vince claiming the top spot next year.

E. Sayers: Vince McMahon continued his long streak of making stars and interesting angles.

Richard Zack: Let's face it, nobody books like Paul Heyman. In fact, does anyone really book WCW? It often looks like they'd draw straws in the dressing room to see who would take part in the angle that night, or for that matter, what would take place that particular night. Sheesh!

Mike Wenrich: Kevin Sullivan had a good '96 because the Horsemen-Dungeon feud is actually interesting. Orndorff is one of the reasons Nitro is the hottest show on TV. Jim Cornette has used his influence from SMW to come up with some neat stuff in the WWF.

Tim Dills: Paul Heyman's storylines make sense. He makes good use of who he has. Kevin Sullivan takes second. The Great American Bash was excellent. And say what you will, sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, but Nitro became a can't miss show this year and Sullivan deserves some credit for that (and for managing a ton of egos). McMahon gets third.

John Siska: Paul Heyman, without a shadow of a doubt. The man is a genius. He booked the Taz vs. Sabu feud a year in advance. He turned Bill Alfonso, Taz, and Shane Douglas into the three most hated men in wrestling. And contrary to others' beliefs, he handled himself very professionally in the Erich Kulas incident. As long as Paul Heyman is around, ECW will be a very successful company.

Dylan Hales: Paul Heyman remains the most creative and at times self-destructive booker in the world, but he is by far the best.

Gary Miller: Paul Heyman gets my vote for the third year in a row for best booker. I don't know what he is doing still in Philly, but I hope he doesn't change a thing.

15-45: Secondary Awards

15. BEST WORKRATE

- 1) Shawn Michaels
- 2) Rey Misterio Jr.
- 3) Chris Benoit
- 4) Dean Malenko
- 5) Steve Austin
- 6) Bret Hart
- 7) Eddie Guerrero
- 8) Sabu
- 9) Ultimo Dragon
- 10) Juventud Guerrera
- BM: Malenko/Rey Jr.
- JW: Chris Benoit
- CZ: Shawn Michaels
- WK: Shawn Michaels

16. INDEPENDENT MVP

- 1) Sabu
- 2) Rob Van Dam
- 3) Bam Bam Bigelow
- 4) Raven
- 5) Terry Funk
- BM: David Jericho
- JW: abstain
- CZ: abstain
- WK: Lenny Lane

17. BEST ROOKIE

- 1) Rocky Maivia
- 2) Billy Kidman
- 3) Chavo Guerrero Jr.
- 4) Steve McMichael
- 5) Spike Dudley
- BM: abstain
- JW: Mark Coleman
- CZ: Billy Kidman
- WK: Billy Kidman

18. BEST PROMOTION

- 1) WCW
- 2) ECW
- 3) WWF
- 4) USWA
- BM: WCW
- JW: WCW
- CZ: ECW
- WK: WCW

19. NON-TV PROMOTION

- 1) NWA New Jersey
- 2) CWA Dallas
- 3) MEWF Maryland
- 4) MTW Detroit
- 5) Peach State Wrestling
- BM: Steve Nelson's Texas
- JW: MEWF
- CZ: Great Lakes Michigan
- WK: NWA New Jersey

20. PROMOTER OF THE YEAR

- 1) Eric Bischoff
- 2) Vince McMahon
- 3) Paul Heyman
- 4) Tod Gordon
- 5) Jerry Lawler
- BM: Eric Bischoff
- JW: Eric Bischoff
- CZ: Tod Gordon
- WK: Eric Bischoff

21. ANGLE OF THE YEAR

- 1) Outsiders invade *
- 2) Hogan turns heel
- 3) Sandman-Raven-Tyler-Laurie
- 4) Pillman-Austin gun
- 5) Douglas-Pitbull1
- BM: Hogan turns heel
- JW: Outsiders invade
- CZ: Outsiders invade
- WK: Outsiders invade

22. RISING STAR

- 1) Steve Austin
- 2) Chris Benoit
- 3) Dallas Page
- 4) Chris Jericho
- 5) Steve Richards
- BM: Chris Benoit
- JW: Chris Benoit
- CZ: Psicosis
- WK: Steve Austin

23. TAILSPIN OF THE YEAR

- 1) Vader
- 2) Randy Savage
- 3) Ric Flair
- 4) Yokozuna
- 5) Bobby Eaton
- BM: Vader
- JW: Ric Flair
- CZ: Randy Savage
- WK: Yokozuna

24. BEST TV SHOW

- 1) WCW Nitro
- 2) ECW
- 3) WWF Raw
- 4) WWF Superstars
- 5) USWA on WMC
- BM: WCW Nitro
- JW: WCW Nitro
- CZ: ECW
- WK: WCW Nitro

25. MOST EMBARRASSING

- 1) Hulk Hogan
- 2) Hacksaw Duggan
- 3) New Diesel & Razor
- 4) T.L. Hopper
- 5) Loch Ness
- BM: USWA's NOD
- JW: New Jack
- CZ: Yokozuna
- WK: Mark Henry

26. WORST WRESTLER

- 1) Hulk Hogan
- 2) Hacksaw Duggan
- 3) Sid
- 4) Glacier
- 5) Mark Henry
- BM: Johnny Grunge
- JW: Loch Ness
- CZ: Hulk Hogan
- WK: Loch Ness

27. ANNOUNCING TEAM

- 1) McMahon & Lawler

- 2) McMahon & Ross
- 3) Schiavone & Tenay & Heenan
- 4) Ross & Cornette
- 5) Schiavone & Heenan
- BM: Ross & Cornette
- JW: Bruce Beck & Jeff Blatnick
- CZ: Schiavone & Tenay
- WK: Ross & Cornette

28. BEST INTERVIEWS

- 1) Steve Austin
- 2) Shane Douglas
- 3) Ric Flair
- 4) Shawn Michaels
- 5) Roddy Piper
- BM: Bret Hart
- JW: Bret Hart
- CZ: Steve Austin
- WK: Steve Austin

29. MOST UNDERUTILIZED

- 1) Leif Cassidy*
- 2) Eddie Guerrero
- 3) Chris Candido
- 4) Alex Wright
- 5) Psicosis
- BM: Psicosis
- JW: Juventud Guerrera
- CZ: Psicosis
- WK: La Parka

30. MOST OVERPUSHED

- 1) Hulk Hogan
- 2) Sid
- 3) Glacier
- 4) Nasty Boys
- 5) Godwinns
- BM: Brian Lee
- JW: Sid
- CZ: Hulk Hogan
- WK: Kevin Sullivan

31. MOST INSULTING STEREOTYPE

- 1) Sonny Onno

15-45: Secondary Awards

2) Goldust
3) Gangstas
4) Cloudy
5) Debra McMichael
BM: Vic Venom, -
wrestling journalist
JW: ECW Hardcore
Wrestling
CZ: Sonny Onno
WK: Leprechaun

32. BEST MANEUVER

1) Dallas Page,
Diamond Cutter
2) Rey Misterio Jr.,
Springboard
Huracanrana
3) Flash Funk, 450
splash
4) Eliminators, Total
Elimination
5) Marc Mero,
Merosault
BM: Springboard
Huracanrana
JW: Elizabeth's Shoe
CZ: Rey Jr. dive over
top rope into
huracanrana
WK: Flash Funk 450

33. WORST MANEUVER

1) Hogan legdrop*
2) Duggan taped fist
3) Duggan shoulder
tackle
4) Sullivan stomp
5) Maivia shoulder
breaker
BM: Sid powerbomb
JW: Xacto knife to
forehead
CZ: Hogan's legdrop
WK: Maivia sh-brkr

34. WORST MATCH

1) Doomsday,
Uncensored
2) WW3 Battle Royal

3) Cornette vs. Jose
Lothario, Mindgame
4) Goldust-Ultimate
Warrior, IYH
5) Ultimate Warrior-
Hunter, WM12
BM: Doomsday
JW: Doomsday
CZ: Doomsday
WK: Doomsday

35. WORST PERSONALITY

1) Eric Bischoff
2) Hulk Hogan
3) Steve McMichael
4) Dusty Rhodes
5) Todd Pettengill
BM: Tommy Dreamer
JW: New Jack
CZ: Hulk Hogan
WK: Dok Hendrix

36. WORST INTERVIEWS

1) Steve McMichael
2) Debra McMichael
3) Teddy Long
4) Elizabeth
5) Ahmed Johnson
BM: Roddy Piper
JW: Ahmed Johnson
CZ: Debra McMichael
WK: Sid

37. FAVORITE WRESTLER

1) Steve Austin
2) Ric Flair
3) Shawn Michaels
4) Dean Malenko
5) Chris Benoit
BM: The AWF
JW: Jushin Liger
CZ: Rey Misterio Jr.

38. LEAST FAVORITE

1) Hulk Hogan
2) Hacksaw Duggan

3) Steve McMichael
4) Sting
5) Shawn Michaels
BM: Hulk Hogan
JW: Tommy Dreamer
CZ: Hulk Hogan

39. JAPAN TEAM

1) Kawada & Taue
2) Misawa & Akiyama
3) Chono & Tenzan
4) Furnas & LaFon
5) Kanemoto & Otani
BM: Kawada & Taue
JW: Misawa &
Akiyama
CZ: Misawa &
Akiyama
WK: Misawa &
Akiyama

40. JAPAN FEUD

1) Misawa's Team vs.
Kawada's Team
2) New Japan vs. UWFI
3) Kanemoto vs. Liger
4) Kyoko vs. Toyota
5) Ultimo vs. Sasuke
BM: Choshu vs.
Hashimoto
JW: New Japan-UWFI
CZ: Misawa &
Akiyama vs. Kawada
& Taue

41. JAPAN MATCH

1) Misawa & Akiyama
vs. Kawada & Taue,
12/6
2) Misawa & Akiyama
vs. Kawada & Akira
Taue 5/23
3) Misawa & Akiyama
vs. Williams & Johnny
Ace, 6/7
4) Dragon vs. Otani,
8/4
5) Inoue vs. Toyota,
12/8

BM: 12/6 AJ tag bout
JW: 12/6 tag bout
CZ: 5/23 tag bout
WK: 5/23 tag bout

42. BEST JAPAN PROMOTION

1) New Japan
2) All Japan
3) All Japan Women
4) FMW
5) Pancrase
BM: New Japan
JW: New Japan
CZ: New Japan
WK: New Japan

43. MEXICO MATCH

1) Rey Jr. vs. Juventud,
3/16, Tijuana
2) Mascarita Sagrada
Jr. & La Parka vs.
Pierroth Jr. & Cien
Caras, AAA TV 6/1
3) Rey Misterio Jr. &
Perro Aguayo vs.
Pierroth & Cibernetico
vs. La Parka & Ultimo
Dragon vs. Psicosis &
Heavy Metal, 6/2 TJ
4) Psicosis vs.
Ultraman, 3/16 TJ
5) Psicosis & Lion
Negro vs. Ultraman &
Halloween barbed wire
JW: Juventud vs. Rey
Jr., 3/16
CZ: Psicosis vs.
Ultraman, 3/16

46. MEXICO FEUD

1) Konnan vs. Antonio
Pena
2) Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis
3) Rey Jr. vs. Juventud
3) Santo vs. Casas
4) Halloween vs Casas
EMLL vs. AAA
BM: Konnan vs. Pena
JW: Casas vs. Santo
CZ: Psicosis vs Rey Jr.

TORCH AWARD PICKS

1. AMERICAN MVP

Chris Zavisa: Shawn Michaels is simply the best thing either major promotion has to offer in terms of workrate, ability to carry a match, and his contribution to pay-per-views. He also has sold a few tickets in house shows to rabid fans as well. If you do not like his act, tough. Appreciate the man for what he does well—damn well.

Rey Misterio Jr. was the best thing WCW had to offer in 1996. It was the year he became a star in this country. Considering that he once was considered for a role designated for a midget and is in a promotion where size is god, the man has accomplished a task worthy of Hercules.

Chris Benoit added interviews to his already superior working ability and became a complete wrestler.

Bruce Mitchell: Shawn Michaels. A proven draw who delivered great matches at the top of the big shows, Michaels had to endure the doubts of Bret Hart, people around him, and those who weren't fans of his male stripper act. He did just that, even if his great performance at Survivor Series was rejected by the on-site fans.

Scott Hall & Kevin Nash. Disqualified from sharing the top spot only because, for a good part of the year, they never wrestled. Hall & Nash made Monday Night Wrestling. The creative and performing ability they took out of Titan and brought to WCW changed the balance of power in the U.S. and made WCW the number one promotion.

Shane Douglas. A flop in the WWF, Douglas showed the ECW "smart-marks" that they were more mark than smart and fleshed out the most complex heel in the business. The Franchise was liable to shake any halo to get his way.

John Williams: Shawn Michaels by acclamation. There simply is no other candidate to consider for the top spot. Drawing power, match quality, impact. And naturally, that makes him a lame duck champion at this point. Sort of like Bret Hart in years past.

Wade Keller: Shawn Michaels is the runaway first place vote getter. Without Shawn Michaels, who would have led the WWF for the eight months that he was on top? Sid? He wasn't ready. Steve Austin? He was still a mid-carder at Wrestlemania. Vader? He had just done a series of one minute jobs to Warrior? It might have actually ended up being Warrior. Had Warrior been positioned on top, there probably wouldn't have been the battle over money, dates, and merchandising that resulted in him departing. Actually, though, Bret Hart probably would have been champ in 1996. He probably wouldn't have taken time off if Michaels

weren't around. But Michaels was, and he delivered more of what a champion should than any champion in the '90s and was rewarded by having it taken away eight months into a successful reign in order to eventually give it back to Bret.

In the ring, Michaels matched or surpassed all of Bret Hart's recent great years of national performances as champion. His best ten matches during 1996 would probably hold up favorably, if not also surpass, Ric Flair's best ten in any of his peak years.

Second place is a tie between Rey Jr. and Dean Malenko—a tie, because they both serviced the same purpose, which was reintroducing junior heavyweights to U.S. wrestling fans in a credible way, yet with very different styles and personalities. Without each other, the other would have been less effective.

Third goes to Kevin Nash. It's impossible to know what his impact in WCW would have been had Scott Hall stayed in the WWF, but given his size, more forceful personality, and recent reign atop the WWF, he was the leader of the Outsiders and defined more than anyone what made the NWO so cool in so many fans' eyes.

His first five months in the WWF alone built a strong case for MVP honors. Not only did he headline or co-headline the first four WWF pay-per-views of the year, but he put in the best performance of his WWF career on his final day in the promotion. He gets credit for setting a good example by doing a clean job to Undertaker and Michaels on his final two pay-per-views.

The WWF's first four months with him as one of the key top names, sharing the spotlight with Shawn Michaels, Bret Hart, and Undertaker, was the strongest all-around segment of a very good all-around year for the WWF.

2. JAPANESE MVP

Chris Zavisa: Manami Toyota, Kenta Kobashi, and Shinya Hashimoto. All Japan Women had its share of troubles in 1996 and the year might otherwise have been a great deal worse for them were it not for Manami Toyota at the very top of the promotional pyramid. She continued to have one great match after another from January through December. She was more valuable to her employer than any other single wrestler in Japan. I have a funny feeling that many years from now we will look back on her as one who truly was the Bret Hart tag line.

Kenta Kobashi fulfilled a dream and won his first Triple Crown championship in fine style. His bouts teaming with the Patriot were among the better ones in the tag tourney. As Misawa and Kawada begin to age and slow down, Kobashi's value will only increase over the next four to six years.

Shinya Hashimoto was again elevated to the role of champion and just like Keiji Muto last year, he turned it up a notch or two and grew into the job. He has never looked better from one month to the next.

Bruce Mitchell: Riki Choshu. The comeback star of the G1 Climax Tournament wins not for his work in the ring, but for being the key figure in the most successful pro wrestling promotion in the world, New Japan.

Jushin Liger. By the same token Liger is the lynch pin of the Japanese cruiserweight scene which provided some of the best wrestling action in the world.

Manami Toyōta. The best all time women's worker added to her reputation by becoming the focus and top star finally in AJW.

John Williams: From being called out by Nobuhiko Takada on the Jan. 4, 1996 Tokyo Dome show, to beating Riki Choshu on the Jan. 4, 1997 Tokyo Dome show, Shinya Hashimoto was the primary focus of the top promotion in the world. That alone merits placing first, and it's backed up by consistent good work.

Jushin Liger gets second as the total package of the junior division—the best booker in the world in 1996, and a top ten worker.

Third to Nobuhiko Takada for having a landmark run headlining major cards. Had New Japan left the IWGP Title on him all year, he would have been an easy number one choice—as easy as Michaels was in the U.S.

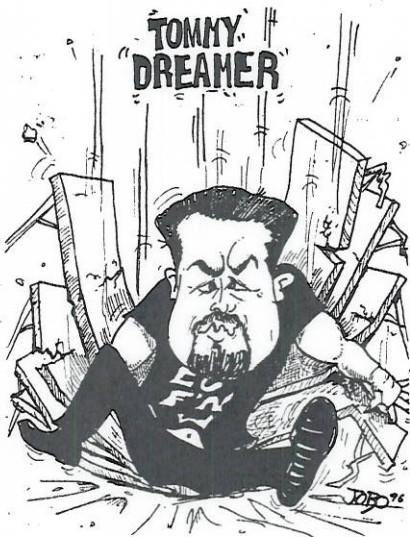
Wade Keller: Kenta Kobashi waited in the wings a long time for a chance to headline as champion for All Japan, and the shadow of Toshiaki Kawada, Mitsuharu Misawa, and even Akira Taue towered over him for years. He continues to put out great performances in so many ways, a obvious as his believability, as subtle as his facial expressions during comebacks. In 1996 he proved that not only can he carry All Japan if asked, but he can fend off challenges from younger wrestlers who want to reach the top faster than he did, most notably Jun Akiyama.

Second place goes to Shinya Hashimoto, third to Jushin Liger.

3. MEXICAN MVP

Chris Zavisa: Rey Misterio Jr., Psicosis, El Hijo del Santo. Rey Jr. was simply great wrestling in his adopted Mexico, in the U.S., or in Japan. He is the 1996 edition of the 1982 Tiger Mask a/k/a Satoru Sayama. What can be higher praise? Psicosis was on the receiving end of many of Rey's great moves and always in position. He is a great athlete in his own right and will someday be recognized with a push that merits his vast talents. Santo may have got lost in the Mexican promotional shuffle, but he is still a tremendous talent, completely professional and always a thrill to watch. Turning heel in a major match at year's end was completely unexpected and helped keep him fresh.

Bruce Mitchell: Konnan, not for his work in the ring, but for the fact that he changed the balance of



TORCH AWARD PICKS

power between the top two companies in Mexico, added another one, and also helped to change the balance of power in the U.S., all with his political maneuvering.

El Hijo del Santo. His shocking heel turn filled Arena Mexico. His feud with cult hero Negro Casas was the biggest in-ring story of the year in Mexico.

Rey Misterio Jr. saved some of his best work for his "hometown" of Tijuana, Mexico.

John Williams: The lucha libre world was a mess in 1996. So convoluted in and out of the ring that it was nearly impossible to follow. What there was to follow in the ring was subpar compared to the standards set just a few years ago. Within this mess, Konnan was the MVP. He was the glue that held together the AAA office that was totally disorganized through the first half of the year. His Baja California AAA affiliate was quite successful during the year, booking an ECW style and drawing fans in numbers that would make Paul Heyman envious. And more than anything, he opened the door for luchadors into the major U.S. promotions. Perhaps his only flaw in that end was selling his talent too cheaply. Second to Negro "Riki" Casas, whose face turn fired up the EMLL office.

Wade Keller: What a strange year in Mexico: Konnan gets first. Without him in Mexico stirring things up, it's tough to decide whether the wrestling scene would have been more settled or even more disorganized. Rey Jr. gets second and Negro Casas gets third.

4. MATCH OF THE YEAR

John Williams: The Ultimo Dragon vs. Rey Misterio Jr. J-Crown Title match from World War III was as close to perfection as any U.S. match came in 1996, and an absolute joy to watch. Misterio Jr.'s Mar. 9, 1996 match against Juventud Guerrera was right at the same level, and while far more spectacular, was just a notch back in execution. They are interchangeable for the top spot, with a slight nod to the WCW match. Third to Michaels vs. Diesel, a shockingly great match.

Chris Zavisa: Just so we all understand each other, I love workrate, workrate, and workrate in that order. It really means very little to me if it is a world title match at Wrestlemania or for eighth runner-up in a backyard tournament. If it's good, it's good.

First goes to Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Juventud Guerrera on Mar. 9. This was the only U.S. match that I gave five stars to all year. It was three great falls of state of the art junior style wrestling that some called the "first match of the 21st century." Keep in mind they had a match just a hair lower 24 hours earlier in New York.

Second goes to the very same Misterio Jr. and his favorite opponent Psicosis in their match from the WCW Bash. You not only got all of Rey's aerial wizardry, but that spine crushing senton off the top to the floor by Psicosis as well. Best match on any pay-per-view all year.

Third goes to Michaels and Mankind, one of the most physically brutal bouts ever staged in the rings of McMahon's WWF. It was five stars of action

only marred by a horrible non-ending, totally blowing the entire thing. It was like a great two hour film with a finish that sucked. Don't blame the actors—blame the director.

Bruce Mitchell: Shawn Michaels vs. Diesel at IYH7. A great "little man vs. the bully" that exceeded the most optimistic expectations. Throw in the Mad Dog's leg and you've got the year's best, most memorable match.

Bret Hart vs. Steve Austin. Perfectly executed work, this match was almost 30 minutes long and still seemed too short. Bret Hart had a memorable return and Steve Austin delivered on the promise he has shown for years.

Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis at Bash at the Beach. The coming out party for both wrestlers to the U.S. was the best match on one of the year's best pay-per-views and a harbinger of things to come in the cruiserweight division.

Wade Keller: There's not a lot of diversity to who starred in my three picks for the matches of the year, but all three matches are very different. First place goes to Shawn Michaels vs. Diesel, not just for the quality and intensity of the match itself, but for what it symbolized—the official start of Michaels's great house show run and the final match for Diesel in the WWF. There was such a storyline behind the match, both real-life and promotional hype; it was unmatched.

Second place goes to the most underrated match of the year, Michaels vs. British Bulldog at "IYH: Beware of Dog." This showed a different style of match for Michaels. Besides being more of a traditional wrestling match rather than an intense grudge match like against Diesel, Michaels had to rise to the occasion to make the defense against Bulldog carry the card when the storyline that brought them together was relatively weak.

Third place goes to Michaels vs. Mankind, which showed yet another strength of Michaels in a very different style with a very different opponent from the other two matches.

Honorable mention has to go to the series of great matches Rey Jr., Malenko, Ultimo Dragon, and Psicosis had with each other, both in WCW and ECW. I didn't think any one match with those four had enough "match of the year" qualities to surpass the top three Michaels matches, but they collectively will be one of the defining elements when 1996 is remembered.

5. HEEL OF THE YEAR

Chris Zavisa: In the WWF Royal Rumble commercial, that guy in the stands with the sign that says, "Austin 3:18" is informed he has his numbers wrong. No, he has the numbers quite right. 3:18 says if you don't vote for Austin you deserve to have your ass kicked.

Steve Richards may be the first heel that you can laugh at, but he is one great piece of work. On tape after tape I enjoyed his work more than almost anyone else. Who else would encourage the crowd to describe his romantic activities with sheep?

Hulk Hogan drew more heat than any wrestler in a long time. His heel interviews were great as was his whole persona. Too bad his work still sucks

worse than the force of gravity

John William: Kevin Nash's "heel" turn in the Hart vs. Undertaker vs. Diesel match gave the WWF a red hot feud to pick up house show business at the start of 1996. His short feud with Michaels did good business as well, while he played a key role on the Outsiders and NWO angles. Behind Michaels, is the no. 2 MVP in the U.S. Of course, applying the term "heel" to Nash is becoming a stretch. Hall and Hogan slide in at two and three.

Bruce Mitchell: Hulk Hogan. Hogan followed perhaps the single-greatest heel speech in wrestling history with some obnoxious posturing to put the final stamp on the year's best concept. Too bad that he wrestles like the broken down old man that he in fact is.

Steve Austin. Stone Cold was one of the two performers, along with Chris Benoit, who came into his own this year. His "boots and trunks" lone wolf persona may have been the best part of the WWF the last six months of the year.

Taz. An intimidating bully whose jealous "I've been screwed" attitude makes for great television. Taz has taken the short-man's complex farther than anyone else in the sport today. Also stood with Chris Benoit as most improved with interviews in one year in recent wrestling history.

Honorable mention to Owen Hart. Hart is the glue that holds WWF shows together and the most underrated performer in the Big Two.

Wade Keller: Diesel, Hulk Hogan, and Shane Douglas. Diesel redefined being a heel even before Steve Austin did later in 1996. He really found a wrestling persona that was true to his own personality. After fighting with phony put-on personalities that didn't fit him, in 1996 he really figured it out. Traditionally, one isn't considered a good heel if the fans cheer him. I disagree. One isn't a good heel if he can't get the fans who were cheering for him to turn on him. Nash had that power.

Hulk Hogan's babyface role became so old hat that his natural charisma, which surpasses that of anyone in the industry, was taken for granted. As a heel, he took that natural charisma in a new direction and it became fresh and inspired. In the ring, rather than cling to superman comebacks, he really sold his ass off for the babyfaces, and took pride in looking cowardly.

Shane Douglas's character was written to be despicable, but to see him play it out made it even more repulsive—in a good way, that is. ECW Arena fans want to cheer cool heels, but Douglas wouldn't let them. He helped build Pitbull2 into a singles star.

6. BABYFACE OF THE YEAR

Chris Zavisa: Shawn Michaels did everything right. He had great matches, sold tickets, and got a pop worthy of a rock star in many areas. When I saw him live at a Detroit house show, the reception was positively rabid. Okay, MSG had problems with him, but that is their problem.

Rey Misterio Jr. gets second. Go back and watch the tape of the WCW Hog Wild show before a bunch of bikers who had never seen him before. He

TORCH AWARD PICKS

was the one to get the show rolling and popped the crowd with a variety of big moves. He is the most likable of all of WCW's stars.

Marc Mero really took off with the WWF and has tremendous potential if they push him properly over the next year. His shooting star press is only exceeded by Thunderbird Como's in its beauty.

Bruce Mitchell: A lousy year for babyfaces. What, with the WCW faces getting punked by the NWO and the WWF ones like Michaels and Hart whining like kindergartners who need a nap.

Sting. Just by shutting up, changing his look, and quitting, Sting became infinitely more interesting. Nice work if you can get it.

Shawn Michaels. Michaels would have run away with this award if his own behavior and Bret Hart's telling comments hadn't ruined his gimmick.

Tito Santana. Santana's earnest AWF World Champion character cracked me up every time I saw it. There's nothing campier than somebody totally unaware of their campiness. Jerry Lewis ought to run a telethon to save the American Wrestling Federation.

John Williams: Shawn Michaels is a no-brainer choice.

Wade Keller: Forget the anomaly at MSG at Survivor Series, Shawn Michaels got the biggest babyface pops in the U.S. in years—and the pops came from crowds that paid just to see him. He sold like mad, building sympathy effectively. Rey Misterio gets second place. The fans took him seriously, despite his stature, and felt his pain when he got rammed into the side of the trailer by Nash. Despite being featured so much by WCW, he still may be the most underutilized wrestler in the U.S. Third place goes to Lex Luger, who deserves some recognition for being the leader of "Team WCW" with very little support at a time when the NWO needed someone to play off of. Randy Savage and Roddy Piper helped for short stints, but Luger was the one constant who represented the anti-NWO faction.

7. FEUD OF THE YEAR

Chris Zavis: The best pure American bouts seen throughout the year were the ones pitting Sabu vs. Rob Van Dam. Not only did both do all of their high-flying moves, some of which bordered on suicidal, but many were extremely stiff and worthy of Vader and Cactus. They started off on a very high note and held it for many months.

Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis was tremendous here in the U.S., Mexico, and Japan. One great move after another with Psicosis the best opponent for Rey

since he positions himself better for his moves than anyone else. The only thing that holds back this feud in WCW is the continual lack of victories for Rey without so much as an upset for Psicosis. It is difficult to achieve greatness when the mystery is completely absent due to poor booking.

Rey Jr. seems to be able to work well with a variety of people and Dean Malenko had many tremendous bouts with him. I still think other opponents are far better suited to Misterio than Malenko, but their bouts were still excellent.

Bruce Mitchell: NWO vs. WCW. The irony of taking Vince McMahon's Billionaire Ted skits and sticking them down his throat must have made this doubly sweet for Eric Bischoff and company. Even with some massive egos interfering to the point of turning fans off, War Games being the worst example, this was the most effective American angle in a decade.

Bret Hart vs. Shawn Michaels. The underlying reality of this feud made for great tension and edgy, telling interviews as both guys tried to outdo each other in every arena.

Raven vs. Sandman. Lousy matches, but a creative, risky storyline as Raven "stole" Sandman's family. If

you were Tyler Fullington which Daddy would you chose, Charles Manson or Barney the Drunk?

John Williams: The most fun over the second half of the year was watching master chest player Chris Benoit take Kevin Sullivan's queen. It's little more than a thinly veiled ploy by the booker to keep himself over, forcing Benoit to work way below his true abilities. But it finally gave Benoit the opportunity to grow in WCW and show his potential. That said, it rates only a very generous number three on my list, WCW vs. NWO and Hart vs. Undertaker vs. Diesel rate one-two for business reasons.

Wade Keller: WCW vs. NWO, on a whole, was the most memorable wrestling feud in a really long time. And after six months, it should have been getting stale, but just as it began to seem old, new life would be breathed into it. It could win in 1997, also. Second place goes to Raven vs. Sandman. The elements of the feud bordered between intriguing and preposterous, which made it fascinating nonetheless. Sabu vs. Rob Van Dam was intriguing in that it told an effective story that the fans of ECW followed, yet neither wrestler did interviews to hype the feud. Rob Van Dam did maybe one or two interviews, and Sabu none. They did their talking in the ring, and the feud had intensity.

10. MOST VALUABLE TEAM

John Williams: For impact only, Hall & Nash lap the field. Frankly, there were no excellent working teams in the U.S. in 1996 as the tag team scene remains sad and barren.

Chris Zavis: ECW's tag team division was so much more interesting than either of the Big Two's. A big reason for that was the work of Saturn & Kronus, particularly Perry Saturn. The one match that just blew me out of the room was the cage match with him coming off the top no less than eight times, two of them to the arena floor. That old tape of Jimmy Snuka doing his splash off the top gets more dated by the minute.

WCW's tag division pretty much sucked except for Harlem Heat and the excellent ring work of Booker T. Take them away from the WCW tag equation and you shudder with what's remaining.

Sabu & Van Dam did a great job with the old "I hate my partner" routine. With guys that can both do great moves, it's hard not to like their matches. Sabu has never considered himself a tag team wrestler, but compare what he does with Van Dam and what he did in Japan with Gary Albright, and it's easy to see a very wide difference.

Bruce Mitchell: The Outsiders. Scot Hall and Kevin Nash were hilarious as they redefined wrestling cool and changed the national balance of power.

The Eliminators. Their highspot-filled style masked enough of their flaws that ECW fans accepted all of that "world's greatest tag team" hype.

Wade Keller: The Eliminators were another element of ECW's "Teflon" reputation. When The Public Enemy left, ECW had also lost Eddie Guerrero, Chris Benoit, and Dean Malenko. ECW risked suffering from the impression that its roster was depleted and its best days were behind them. The Eliminators stepped up and almost immediately filled the void left by TPE.

Second goes to Hall & Nash, who didn't fit the mold of a traditional tag team, but nevertheless were so valuable to WCW they get second place.

Third goes to British Bulldog & Owen Hart who gave the WWF at least one main event caliber tag team to build the division around in the last half of the year. They were the best actual tag team in the U.S. but didn't have opponents to shine against.

9. BRAWLER OF THE YEAR

Bruce Mitchell: Mankind. Mick Foley was able to intelligently carry the Dead Man to the most entertaining matches of his, uh, life. These were great brawls, but they still made sense as matches.

Chris Benoit. Benoit wrestled away from is technical strengths to have wild, intense brawls with Kevin Sullivan. He made the bathroom a place to be for many WCW fans.

All of those garbage wrestlers in ECW tie for third.

Chris Zavis: Mankind. Since he joined the WWF, the ability to showcase his brawling excellence has been diminished due to the WWE's



TORCH AWARD PICKS

usual style restrictions. However, there is still no single individual in the business who comes close to what he is capable of once it leaves the confines of the ring. He got more out of the Undertaker than any opponent in history and much of those bouts were set up as brawls.

Sandman and Tommy Dreamer get the other two slots. ECW has the best brawling in the nation and it's difficult not to look at eighty or more men who all had great moments moving furniture among the crowd. I would pick out Sandman as second because he seems to get by on guts alone as showcased in many violent brawls both in Philly and on the road. Dreamers transformation from pretty boy to hardcore innovator of violence is so complete that it is hard to imagine him as anything but a blood and guts favorite. Anybody who can go through three stacked tables should get at least a third spot.

John Williams: Cactus Jack was overrated in 1995. In 1996, Mankind had one of Mick Foley's best years. The ability to drag quality matches out of the Undertaker boggles the mind, while his PPV match against Michaels was top flight. A tip of the hat to Steve Regal and Belfast Bruiser. Regal is fun to watch—a wrestler who likes working stiff with an opponent and also seems to enjoy having the opponent slap back. And Bruiser slapped him around harder than anyone. A second go-around of this feud would be nice to see.

Wade Keller: So many of the wrestlers who are considered to be great brawlers are actually poor wrestlers who brawl because it's easier than learning how to wrestle. Just because one brawls all the time doesn't mean they are the best brawler any more than the wrestler who talks the most is the best on interviews. The brawlers who really deserve credit are those who can wrestle several styles well, but choose to brawl when the occasion calls for it and when it means something.

Chris Benoit managed to carry Kevin Sullivan to a match that got picked by many as one of the best matches of the year. Benoit is good at whatever style he wrestles, and in brawling, he is among the best. He gets third place. He didn't have enough other brawls to rate higher.

Second place goes to Shane Douglas whose brawls in ECW did the best job of telling a story. When he got hit with a weapon, he actually would sell it for longer than five seconds. His offense was believable and he had the crowd's emotions in the palms of his hands without having to do non-stop stunt bumps to get pops.

First place goes to Mankind because he carried Undertaker to the best brawls in the WWF in years (not counting most of the Boiler Room Brawl, though), only topped by his match against Shawn Michaels at IYH: Mindgames.

10. BEST AERIAL WRESTLER

Bruce Mitchell: Rey Misterio Jr. He made any WCW show worth watching and once again raised the stakes worldwide for what it takes to be a great flying wrestler.

Ultimo Dragon. A consummate flyer who is every bit as comfortable on the mat. Ultimo Dragon

may well be this country's best all-around worker.

Psicosis. He could get over better than any other lucha wrestler in the U.S., with the possible exception of Rey Jr., if he weren't criminally held back by WCW.

Chris Zavisa: Rey Misterio Jr. is an easy choice for first. The man has moves that seem to defy both gravity and the rules of physics that keep the rest of us ground-bound. There are a few people around the world who individually can do many of those moves, but no one person does them all with such natural grace and ease as Rey does.

I think the second best flier is Psicosis, but I cannot give him anything since his use was terribly limited and he did seem to mess up at the most inopportune of times. Second then goes to Scorpio for his great work in ECW coming off the top rope more than almost anyone in the business. Not only does he execute his moves with breathtaking beauty, but he almost always hits just in the right spot. Not an easy thing to do when you are spinning, flipping, and turning in mid-air like that.

Third goes to Sabu. He flies over the crowd rail at least once almost every night and does so with complete disregard for his own safety or longevity. His move, which starts as a triple jump and ends up in a flip splash on a table over the crowd railing is almost beyond belief.

John Williams: Rey Jr. is the obvious number one. Dragon number two. His aerial spots are incorporated into his matches to compliment his other offensive moves. Eddie Guerrero gets third for much the same reasons. Far too many of the high flyers, Rey Jr. included, let the flying comprise far too much of their offense at the expense of their other skills.

Wade Keller: Rey Misterio Jr. is the most graceful and Sabu is the most inventive and crazy. They get first and second. Third goes to Ultimo Dragon for his prudent use of flying moves. Honorable mention to Juventud Guerrero and Psicosis, who some day may break out of Rey Jr.'s shadow, or at least not be excluded by the "one masked lucha guy per category" rule that seems to have been followed by WCW.

11. BEST MAJOR EVENT

Bruce Mitchell: WCW Great American Bash. A great match (Dean Malenko vs. Rey Jr.), a great brawl (Chris Benoit vs. Kevin Sullivan, falls count anywhere), and two great angles (Steve McMichael turns heel, Outsiders slam Eric Bischoff through a table); made for a show that was everything pay-per-view wrestling should be.

WWF King of the Ring. The Steve Austin show was a lot of fun and the Shawn Michaels vs. British Bulldog match was damn good.

WCW SuperBrawl. An hour's worth of great undercard action followed by the most heated live main event I've ever seen (WarGames—Flair & Anderson & Luger vs. The NWO) would have been a truly great show if Hogan's ego hadn't made it such a downer at the end.

Chris Zavisa: Some of the best matches on any major event were consistently held on WCW

pay-per-views. Unfortunately, they were always on the front end of the card and were soon followed by either mediocrity or garbage. A half of a pay-per-view does not a great event make. The only group that had great events from the opening bell to the last match was ECW.

First goes to the Nov. 16 "November to Remember" with the return of Terry Funk, the debut of the Blue World Order, and that rabid Sabu & Van Dam vs. Eliminators mini-marathon. Heyman and Gordon usually go all out to make this annual event their best card of the year and they certainly delivered again.

The other two cards that were outstanding were the Aug. 3 Steve Williams debut and the June 22 Hardcore Heaven show. If they can combine the best features of each of these shows on the PPV while deleting the offensive stuff, they could have one of the greatest events of all time. My money is on Heyman and Gordon to deliver again.

John Williams: The Great American Bash first for combining match quality, angles, and impact. Here's waiting for Hall & Nash turning on Bischoff and giving him another ride on the jackknife express. Second to Starrcade for the fine undercard delivering great matches, and a main event that delivered what the fans wanted to see—Piper beating Hogan. UFC13 gets third as the best UFC show of the year.

12. MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Bruce Mitchell: Debra McMichaels. Her High-School-Girlfriend-with-a-Goon persona is more of a natural than even Sunny's, and her heat generating ability is second to none already.

Bill Alfonso. His irritating pipsqueak character is an effective complement to Taz's bully.

Eric Bischoff. When he kept his ego in check, Bischoff's smarmy, "Oh I Love That!" posturing was very entertaining.

Chris Zavisa: Is there any educated fan out there who really believes that the work of any manager in 1996 was in a class with that which won similar accolades for Jimmy Hart in the mid-'80s or Jim Cornette up until his recent joining the WWF? Even Hart and Cornette can no longer compete with their own reputations.

I do not know if Steve Richards is truly a manager or a wrestler, but he managed Raven throughout the year ("My man, Raven") and did it with great wit, flair, and aplomb. One of the Big Two is really missing the boat in not signing him up to do a similar act for them. He is as good on the mic and in acting skits as anybody. Plus as an added bonus, he can take more bumps than even Bobby Heenan in his prime.

Cornette may not be what he once was when showcased properly, but he still is a notch better than most other traditional managers. I only wish Vince would just let him loose and give him the time he needs. I thought that may happen with the Michaels feud, but that was scratched due to office politics. Too bad.

Bill Alfonso did not have the year that he did in 1995, but then again, who did? His work fronting for Taz with that infernal whistle was maddening. He

TORCH AWARD PICKS

makes you want to punch that whistle right past those ugly teeth. And that is precisely what he wants you to feel.

Wade Keller: In no year in recent memory have managers been less integral a part of the storylines than in 1996. Debra McMichael did surge late in the year and is an early leader in 1997. Woman gets second place for doing the best job what she does. Jim Cornette gets third for giving the best interviews of any managers during the year.

First place goes to a surprise pick of sorts in Eric Bischoff. Had some who is looked at more like a manager, such as Jimmy Hart or Jim Cornette or Bobby Heenan or even Ted DiBiase done exactly what Bischoff did and gotten the heat Bischoff got, he would have been a runaway winner in this category. Bischoff did what a manager is supposed to do. Talk big, and then hide behind the bigger men whom he manages.

13. BEST BROADCASTER

Bruce Mitchell: Jim Ross. The only positive thing Titan's disastrous "return of Diesel and Razor" angle did was give Jim Ross the television exposure he needed to revive his career. He showed that when he's allowed to be, he's still the all-around best broadcast out there. That Monday Night soliloquy was a hoot, to boot.

Ken Shamrock. Shamrock did a great job explaining the intricacies of both Pancrase and UFC. His natural pleasure at bringing the sport to a new or growing audience shone through with everything he said.

Joey Styles. Styles is still good, and gets off some funny lines, but I'm sick and tired of Styles telling the audience what to think about every single situation over and over and over again.

Chris Zavis: Joey Styles can still call a match with so much energy that it adds almost a full star to the actual performance. That is what he is supposed to do and he does it better than anyone ever has. He is as much a part of ECW as Heyman, Sabu, or Sandman. In fact, with the exception of Heyman, he may be the company's MVP. Although I must confess I have tired of hearing him rename every move in honor of which wrestler is doing it at that particular moment. "FrankenMikey?" A bit much, don't you think?

Mike Tenay does a wonderful job actually attempting to call the match which is taking place before his eyes. That is often a rare quality on WCW events. He does his homework and puts forth the effort to both learn and educate. The worse of his fellow announcers believe they have nothing more to learn and their audience can never be educated. That is a huge difference between Tenay and most others.

Tony Schiavone has his faults, but he tries mightily to do a professional job amidst a gaggle of fools. He usually succeeds.

John Williams: Bruce Beck is the best play-by-play man in the business, doing both UFC and Pancrase exceptionally well. Number two man Mike Tenay added a new dimension to American wrestling—actually attempting to call moves and give backgrounds of the wrestlers. It's sad that Tenay can't team with number three man, Jim Ross. Ross badly wants to call matches as they should be called, yet is stuck in an environment that doesn't really allow it.



Wade Keller: Joey Styles did the best job calling matches consistently throughout the year and gets first.

Jim Ross was the most entertaining for a variety of reasons, and his call of the action on Superstars showed he is above all else in two styles—squash matches and mega-matches. Styles is better than Ross at making a mid-level match seem important. Ross best at being interesting during squashes and taking mega-matches up a level of seeming to be a classic.

Third place goes to Tony Schiavone for playing his role of spokesperson for WCW so well during the year. When Bischoff joined the NWO, Schiavone picked up the slack and became the lead announcer for Nitro and stayed energetic, impassioned, and sincere two hours every week. His more casual banter on WorldWide every week with Bobby Heenan is unclaimed, but worthy of note.

14. BEST BOOKER

Bruce Mitchell: The WCW committee. Hogan, Hall, Nash, Bischoff, Sullivan, et al made WCW in particular, and the NWO specifically, the talk of every wrestling fan.

Paul Heyman. The Sabu-Taz build-up, the Raven-Dreamer angle, and the Stevie Richards-Blue Meanie parodies (their "Kiss" parody may have been the single funniest thing I've ever seen in wrestling) were creative and original, but Heyman began to show signs of Dusty Rhodes/Jim Cornette style four-year booking burnout but the end of 1996.

Sgt. Slaughter/Tito Santana. For the sole reason that they put emphasis on the structure of the rules and the story, the AWF had something valuable to teach the other three U.S. promotions.

Chris Zavis: It has been said many times before, but its truth has not changed. Paul Heyman gets more from less than anyone in the business. If I had a wrestling company, he is the one I would want wielding the pencil. He is a shrewd judge of talent, both in assessing a person's strengths and their weaknesses. He then knows just what to do with both. So few people in this business can do that. Just look at what he did with Chris Benoit's interview

skills. The man is actually good now thanks to the work Heyman did with him. Long before Eric Bischoff went to L.A. and "discovered" the talents of the Mexican fliers, they were having great matches for Heyman at ECW Arena.

Kevin Sullivan does a great job with at least half the talent he has to work with. Some would say that is all the talent he can work with. It is hard to fault him for the program of Hogan and the NWO since they are in a world of their own. I even give him credit for finding a way to make Kevin Sullivan an interesting wrestler once again via a feud with Chris Benoit.

Vince McMahon still commits many of the same sins that he has for the last two decades, but he is trying to learn and from time to time shows signs of innovation. Putting Michaels on top was just the right thing to do and allowing Austin to go all the way with his character helped get him across bigtime. Near year's end he made big errors giving his title to the walking time bomb, but in McMahon's defense, it is hard to break old habits.

John Williams: The best booker in the U.S. is no individual. Rather, it's everyone who's had their hands in the WCW booking committee jar in 1996. The promotion's eclectic mix makes the product always intriguing. Of course, it's also an eclectic mess much of the time, which makes this same crew the worst booker in the U.S. Best and worst doesn't make sense, right? Well, neither does much of WCW's booking. But what the hell. It's kind of fun, and a little bit goofy even when it's bad.

Wade Keller: The WWF had its best year of the '90s and Vince McMahon managed to head up that effort despite losing three of his top five stars for most of the year and having to compete against the freight train momentum of the NWO.

WCW's Eric Bischoff and Kevin Sullivan are right up there with McMahon, mainly for creating the NWO and managing to keep Nitro fresh despite the demanding two-hours live weekly format. The ratings results, and overall success of WCW in 1996 makes them a close second. Sullivan did the dirty work, but Bischoff was the visionary behind the big picture, and they both wouldn't have been successful without the other, even though they didn't always work all that closely week in and week out. Because they had the advantage of a bigger payroll, their accomplishment falls to second place behind McMahon, even though the team that turned around WCW would have in the past been considered a gimme pick for bookers of the year.

Third place goes to Paul Heyman, who managed to take ECW through another year with its head above water, and like the WWF managed to withstand the loss of several key names and build new stars in the process. With only one hour of TV per week, he has it easier than the WWF and WCW, but with such a limited budget, that advantage is offset. His booking, sometimes suffers from being too clever or convoluted for its own good where it takes a long explanation to get across what happened in the ring to forward a storyline, but too much depth to angles is a refreshing criticism considering that most bookers fall to being much too shallow in their storylines.

WRESTLING'S 15 MOST INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE OF 1996

For the fifth straight year, PRO WRESTLING TORCH presents a list of "Wrestling's 15 Most Influential People." While by no means a science, the list is sorted in order of influence throughout the entire year of 1996. If someone had power throughout the first six months of the year and then dropped out of wrestling, they would have just as much of a chance of making the list as someone who entered the business in July and had power the final six months. The list was compiled with input from a variety of sources within the industry, including journalists, wrestlers, promoters, and others who closely follow the inner-workings of the industry.

The list considers only those who wielded power over the United States wrestling scene as opposed to a worldwide perspective. "Influence" and "power" can and does come in a variety of forms, but is gauged mainly on two elements: (1) how much power one wielded throughout the year in generated revenue for themselves or employees in wrestling; and (2) how much one's actions or lack of actions changed the course of the industry either in the short or long-term. The list is restricted to those who work for or within the industry itself, not others outside of it (such as reporters, corporate CEOs, television or pay-per-view executives, etc.) who may have changed the course of the industry in one way or another.

More stress is given to those who change the industry for the long term rather than someone who is clearly part of a fad or has a short string of influence that shows no sign of leaving a permanent mark on the industry.

The top 15 finishers are again listed this year, in order, along with biographical background and details of their influence on the industry during the year. Analysis is provided on why they finished where they did relative to others who made the list. Mitigating factors are included, listing a few reasons they may not have as much power as is widely assumed or factors that kept them from finishing higher on the list. At the end of each box is a forecast for 1997 and beyond.

Following the list of the top 15, there is a listing of past year's lists. An explanation is provided explaining why those who made the list last year didn't make the list this year. In the five years this list has been put out, it has been well-received within the industry, lauded as reasonable even by those who disagree with some placements, and become a source of discussion by those within the industry near the end of the year wondering where they'll land.

1 ERIC BISCHOFF World Championship Wrestling

Facts: Position: Senior Vice President... Years in Position: 4... Age: 41... Previous Rankings: 2, 3, 2, —...

Analysis: In 1996, by a convincing margin, Bischoff was the most influential person in wrestling in the U.S. The aggressive expansion of Monday Nitro to two hours not only put WCW ahead of the WWF in the high profile Monday Night Wars and shot up company morale, but it redefined how the industry looks at promoting wrestling on television. Any remnants of the theory that you can't afford to give away too much on TV, both in quantity and quality, all but disappeared.

The aggressive signing of main eventers Scott Hall and Kevin Nash changed the face of wrestling. By not resting on merely acquiring Hall and Nash, but then leading the formation of the NWO gimmick, he hit his first full-fledged grand slam as head of the creative aspects of WCW. The use of Roddy Piper at the end of the year surpassed all expectations. He was promoted as a second tier "legend" in the WWF, but in WCW he became a main eventer who headed up Starrcade, WCW's most successful event of 1996. After earlier proclaiming lucha libre wrestling as too culturally different to ever make it in the U.S., he gave it a chance in 1996 and it worked. He showed more commitment and found more success promoting cruiserweights than any modern era promoter.

On camera, he was the voice of WCW during the initial months of the NWO invasion, and then became an integral part of the NWO itself when he "turned on WCW." On and off camera he had more influence on the industry than he had in past years.

Mitigating Factors: He's still playing with other people's money... Bischoff has to work harder than McMahon at keeping wrestlers and others in management happy because he can be replaced. He has to answer to Harvey Schiller, who would occupy a top spot on this list were he more involved day-to-day...

Forecast: With WCW buyrates increasing, house show attendance increasing, and table ratings increasing, he should be able to keep the momentum rolling. His drive should keep him going for as long as he finds wrestling a challenge. As long as he keeps his ego and lifestyle in check, he should be able to keep

2 VINCE MCMAHON World Wrestling Federation

Facts: Position: President/Owner of Titan Sports... Years in Position: 14... Age: 51... Previous Rankings: 3, 2, 1, 1...

Analysis: For the third year in a row McMahon does not hold the number one position in wrestling. Had this poll gone back ten years earlier than when it started in 1992, he would have been at the top of the list for eight or nine of those years.

He is still the most autonomously powerful person on this list. He answers to no one but the ticket buying public and, on rare occasion, USA Network officials. While he moves back to the number two position from number three in 1995, it's only because last year's number two—Terry Bollea—lost a tad more power than he did. While Bollea had to share power with new acquisitions Hall and Nash, McMahon become more reliant than ever on USA Network. By virtually dropping out of syndication, he became virtually a subsidiary of USA Network in the sense that if USA dropped the WWF, he might be out of business. Despite the drop in the syndicated network (which in theory competed with WWF cable programs), cable ratings declined to the lowest levels this decade.

But all that said, house show business reached the highest level this decade with average paid attendance up about 40 percent from just two years earlier. Even with 12 pay-per-views during the year, buyrates rebounded from the dangerously low depths of late 1995. He showed his promoting resilience surviving just fine despite losing Bret Hart, Kevin Nash, Scott Hall, and Ultimate Warrior (among others) for most of the year.

Mitigating Factors: Without TBS and Time-Warner behind him, he doesn't have the resources to absorb a downtrend in business as easily as WCW. That said, being that wrestling is his only business, he is more likely to tough it out through another wrestling recession... There is no doubt he is among the top three powerbrokers, and some have argued he deserves the top spot again, but being dominated on Monday nights hurt the exposure Raw received in the TV industry.

Forecast: He doesn't appear to be in danger of losing substantial ground in 1996, but the NWO concept seems to have enough steam to prevent him from moving up...

3 TERRY BOLLEA World Championship Wrestling

Facts: Position: WCW franchise wrestler... Years in Position: 3... Age: 44... Previous Rankings: 1, 1, 11, 5...

Analysis: Bollea is among the most opportunistic wrestlers of this era. As he finally came to grips with the fact that his red and yellow superhero persona was tired and passé, he saw the opportunity to jump aboard the train being conducted by Hall and Nash. His joining them as the "mystery third man" launched the NWO and probably added several years onto his career.

He continued to book his own storylines, matches, and angles in 1996. He had less influence on other areas of WCW as the year progressed, in part because he became less insecure with himself. When his babyface character was dying, he retained power through holding others back. With the NWO hot, he kept his hands off other areas of WCW he might have squelched in the past such as the cruiserweight division.

Mitigating Factors: He drops a position in 1996 in part because without him, the NWO would go on and arguably Hall and Nash would shine without having to share the spotlight. Bollea knows Hall and Nash threaten his omnipotence and thus has done whatever necessary to remain on their side.

Forecast: He is as excited about wrestling as he has been in five years. That enthusiasm should lead to extended success and power.

6 BRET HART World Wrestling Federation

Facts: Position: WWF wrestler... Years in Position: 12... Age: 39... Previous Rankings: New to List...

Analysis: Not only did he surpass Shawn Michaels as the highest paid wrestler in the WWF in 1996, but he passed Michaels and the departed Hall and Nash as the most influential. Bret is not shy in expressing his many opinions. He decried anything resembling a "circus atmosphere," he didn't like transvestite women (Cloudy), he didn't like hinted-at lesbian themes. Whatever he didn't like seemed to be toned down or eliminated from the WWF while they were courting him. He gave the WWF a stable veteran presence in the locker room who, even though he has his detractors, doesn't elicit uprisings as Michaels and The Clique did.

By choosing the WWF over WCW, even though the WWF offered less money, he gave the WWF some much needed star power. Had he gone to WCW instead, the WWF may have never recovered from the morale blow.

Mitigating Factors: He sat out most of 1996... Despite the bidding war for his services, he is not a proven TV ratings draw by himself... His importance may be overrated. WWF business neither dropped when he left, nor jumped when he returned...

Forecast: With Michaels taking a leave of absence in 1997, he becomes the undisputed top WWF wrestler. Should remain high.

4 PAUL HEYMAN Extreme Champ. Wrestling

Facts: Position: ECW Owner/Promoter/Booker... Years in Position: 3... Age: 31... Previous Rankings: 4, 5, 10, —, —...

Analysis: He was ranked number four last year and remains there this year. While ECW's influence on other promotions dropped in 1996 compared to 1995, the overall power of ECW within the industry grew. ECW stabilized itself as a (distant) third major promotion in the U.S., providing full-time incomes to the top half of its roster.

Mitigating Factors: While the Big Two promotions copied ECW in 1995 in terms of violence, they backed down from that approach for the most part in 1996. Heyman's power rests more now on ECW's success rather than his influence on others—which is the way he'd prefer it in the long run anyway.

Forecast: With pay-per-view on the horizon in April 1997, there is little doubt Heyman's ECW will draw more revenue in 1997 than in the previous two years combined. Should ECW pay-per-view(s) be profitable, ECW could remove the "distant" from in front of their status as the "distant third promotion in the U.S." If they lose money on pay-per-view, they may have to settle in as a regional niche promotion. Even if that happened, it's unlikely anyone would surpass Heyman in this number four position. He's unlikely to rise higher given the three major powerbrokers ahead of him.

7 SCOTT HALL & KEVIN NASH World Championship Wrestling

Facts: Position: WCW wrestlers... Years in Position: Less than One... Ages: 38 and 39... Previous Rankings: 5, —, —, —...

Analysis: Last year, grouped with Shawn Michaels, these two made up part of the most powerful group of wrestlers in wrestling history. The concept of the Clique behind the scenes in the WWF led to the concept of the NWO when they jumped to WCW. They were accused of really trying to "take over" the WWF by fellow wrestlers. In WCW, that became an angle.

In WCW, even without the vocal Shawn Michaels with them, they picked up where they left off in the WWF. They became tight with Bischoff, participated in scheming NWO storylines, and had private meetings with Bischoff when they had ideas or grievances. They gained so much perceived power that Terry Bollea kissed up to them! They had their differences with Bollea during the year, but both staked their territory and found a comfort zone by the end of the year.

Mitigating Factors: Their power off camera was created in great part by the success of their characters on camera. Only Bollea's presence holds them back from reaching the level of power they had in the WWF...

Forecast: They remain a team in and out of the ring and as the NWO continues to draw ratings, they will remain influential.

5 KEVIN SULLIVAN World Championship Wrestling

Facts: Position: WCW head booker... Years in Position: 2... Age: 48... Previous Rankings: 7, —, —, —...

Analysis: Kevin Sullivan's supporters will tell you his influence on WCW over the past two years has been highly underrated. They say he is the glue that keeps Nitro from falling apart every Monday night. He is the one who succeeds in juggling all of the pockets of power in WCW (Bischoff, Bollea, Hall & Nash, Flair, Sting & Luger, etc.)—not an easy task. They say he is the mind behind the successful Nitro format that has blown away the WWF in the Monday night battle. He does a lot of unglamorous dirty work.

Mitigating Factors: His critics say he is a mediocre booker who has been handed the deepest roster in the history of the sport, a huge television budget, several major acquisitions from the competitor, and merely packages the ideas that the top wrestlers book themselves. WCW's booking is not done by one man or by committee. Each top faction books their own programs. Sullivan simply puts them in a slot on television and tries to keep everybody happy.

Forecast: Sullivan could hurt himself—as most bookers do—by booking himself in too prominent of a position. That alone could cause a backlash and cost him his job. There are no concrete signs, though, that his days are numbered thus he may stay his ground in '97.

8 BRUCE PRICHARD & JIM ROSS World Wrestling Federation

Facts: B.P.: Position: WWF V.P., assistant to McMahon... Years in Position: 5... Age: 34... Previous Rankings: 12, —, —, —...

Facts: J.R.: Position: WWF V.P., assistant to McMahon... Years in Position: 2... Age: 45... Previous Rankings: 11, —, —, 6...

Analysis: It's difficult to separate these two from each other. Along with Jim Cornette and Jake Roberts, they made up the booking committee that carried out Vince McMahon's wishes, brought up new ideas, and assured McMahon that he is wrestling's smartest promoter. With Pat Patterson not as involved behind the scenes as he was a couple of years ago, Prichard and Ross became the senior members of McMahon's creative staff.

Their responsibilities increased during the year after J.J. Dillon left. They picked up some of his duties, including talent relations (i.e. playing "bad cop" for McMahon)...

Mitigating Factors: As the second most powerful force in the WWF front office, in theory they should be higher ranked, but McMahon wields 98 percent of the influence over the creative product and is known for preferring "yes men" around him (although he'd be the last person to admit it). Prichard (happily) and Ross (somewhat reluctantly) play their "yes men" roles to McMahon's satisfaction.

Forecast: Both are master office politicians and skilled in their jobs and should stay put.

9

SHAWN MICHAELS World Wrestling Federation

Facts: Position: WWF wrestler... Years in Position: 8... Age: 31... Previous Rankings: 5, 11, —, —...

Analysis: He had the most successful run as WWF Champion since Hulk Hogan in his peak years. He was the undisputed top house show draw of 1996. Despite the departure of Bret Hart from the WWF after Wrestlemania, the WWF business increased rather than decreased during Michaels's year on top. He set a standard for work ethic on the top of cards that influenced the rest of the crew. He put to rest any outdated theories that a World Champion in this era must be at least 6-3 and 250 pounds.

Mitigating Factors: Without the support group of Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, and Sean Waltman, and with the added responsibilities he had in his schedule as champion he didn't have time to influence much beyond his own role. He was too busy and stressed out to concern himself with mid-card matters as he had in the past. After Hall and Nash left, Michaels's bond with McMahon grew stronger as both needed each other more. Michaels was actually criticized by some behind the scenes for seeing too many of McMahon's actions through rose colored glasses.

Forecast: With his early 1997 leave of absence, his future is up in the air. If he returns, look for him to remain on this list.

10

REY MISTERIO JR. World Championship Wrestling

Facts: Position: WCW Cruiserweight Wrestler... Years in Position: 1... Age: 23... Previous Rankings: New to List...

Analysis: Recently it seems a spot is reserved on this list each year for a wrestler who influences the working style inside U.S. rings. Last year it was Sabu who changed the boundaries of what could be accomplished in the ring, out of the ring, and with tables. In 1996, without question, Rey Misterio Jr. not only changed the way the country looked at smaller wrestlers, but along with Dean Malenko opened the doors for many smaller wrestlers to showcase their skills on Monday Nitro. Rather than be a ratings liability because of his size, his matches consistently drew strong ratings during the quarter hour during which his match appeared.

His featured role in WCW throughout the year may influence smaller athletes to try a career in pro wrestler, potential star light-weights who would not have bothered in past years when there clearly was no good paying position for them in the United States.

Mitigating Factors: He has no office influence. There are still critics of his within the company who will hold him back from moving to the next level in national fame.

Forecast: He is such a remarkable athlete that in a justified world he would be among the highest paid. He could make the list for a second year in a row if he stays healthy...

11-15

ZANE BRESLOFF... ED COHEN... KONNAN... JERRY LAWLER... PAUL ALPERSTEIN

11 and 12/Zane Bresloff and Ed Cohen:

As events coordinators for WCW and the WWF respectively, these two headed up the most successful year of house show business in the U.S. this decade. Bresloff, the WWF events coordinator during the late '80s and early '90s, moved to WCW and kept up with WCW's increased schedule. He helped WCW break ground in new, larger, non-southern arenas. At first his job with Nitro was to fill seats with giveaway tickets. He conquered that challenge, and by the end of the year Nitro had become a profitable, top drawing weekly event for WCW. In the WWF, meanwhile, Cohen set five year records and all-time records in one town after another, large and small while coordinating the busy road schedule the WWF promoted. Cohen did that despite having the weakest syndicated network in the history of the modern-era WWF and decreasing cable ratings...

13/Konnan: In the ring, Konnan has lived down to his critics' expectations, not yet quite finding his place in the U.S. style of pro wrestling. More comfortable in a six-man, get-lost-in-the-crown style of Mexico, he's had trouble stringing together good singles matches. He underwent a major character change, going from basically his real life persona as an eager, young, aspiring babyface to a street punk heel gimmick. Behind the scenes, though, he was the powerbroker who

kept the group of top flight Mexican cruiserweights in WCW despite the political upheaval in Mexico that saw AAA break apart and eventually form an alliance with the WWF. WCW should probably come to Konnan for more advice since he has smart mind to the business and knows the strengths and weaknesses of the other lucha wrestlers better than anyone else in WCW...

14/Jerry Lawler: With Jerry Jarrett not involved in day-to-day operations of the USWA, Lawler was the head honcho. He brought in Larry Burton who caused a major upheaval when he became general manager of the USWA. Burton drove away one person after another (including 30 year USWA veteran Dave Brown in early 1997). He wanted to be the Pat Riley or Jimmy Johnson of regional wrestling and he wanted to take the USWA in the direction of ECW. He fined and suspended wrestlers for being late, yet more people laughed at him behind his back than showed up at some of the events he promoted. Lawler's internal changes in the USWA changed the course of the country's last remaining "old guard" territory...

15/Paul Alperstein: Too quaint for the times, Alperstein's AWF was a reality check of sorts, reminding the industry how much it has changed in ten years. Some of his ideas were as old as his main eventers, but the lower key, law and order style has value even today.

NOTEBOOK

Previous Rankings: 1992: Vince McMahon, Bill Watts, Pat Patterson, Ric Flair, Terry Bollea, Jim Ross, Dave Meltzer, Jim Cornette, Dusty Rhodes, Jerry Jarrett...

1993: V. McMahon, Bischoff, Patterson, Jerry Jarrett, Jim Cornette, Ric Flair, Rhodes, Meltzer, Antonio Pena, Paul Heyman, Tod Gordon, Bollea, Linda McMahon, Vader, Ron Skoler, Jim Crockett...

1994: Bollea, V. McMahon, Bischoff, Flair, Heyman, Patterson, Jimmy Hart, Antonio Pena, Cornette, Jerry Lawler, Skoler, L. McMahon, Gordon, Shawn Michaels, Royce Gracie...

1995: Bollea, Bischoff, V. McMahon, Heyman, Michaels & The Clique (Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, Sean Waltman, Hunter Hearst Helmsley), Kevin Sullivan, Ken Shamrock, J. Hart, Sabu, Jim Ross, Bruce Prichard, Randy Hales, Flair, Konnan...

Drop-Offs: Ken Shamrock didn't make the top 15 this year in part due to inactivity and in part because whatever influence UFC was going to have on pro wrestling, it had in 1994 and 1995, but not really in 1996. UFC became an entity unto itself. By leaving Pancrase, he took away that link to pro wrestling. He was still among the next tier of influential people in wrestling thanks in part to his educational color commentary on UFC and Pancrase pay-per-views... Jimmy Hart's power was derived from being a close confidante to Terry Bollea (Hulk Hogan). He and Hogan grew

apart this year, as evidenced by Hart's decreased role on television and the fact that he did not follow Hogan into the NWO. He is still influential in WCW relative to others without a formal title, but he no longer has Hogan's ear like he did in past years... Sabu made the list because of his influence on the in-ring style of wrestling in the U.S. In 1996 Rey Misterio Jr. clearly surpassed Sabu and took that spot on the top 15 list. Sabu still has as much pull in ECW as any wrestler when he chooses to exercise it and is among their five most valuable wrestlers, but with his influence on the sport having been felt in 1995, he didn't make enough waves in 1996 to stay on the list... Randy Hales booked the USWA throughout most of 1996, but the influence of the USWA in the overall landscape decreased under his booking and general managership. In the final months of the year his influence was replaced by new general manager Larry Burton and eventually Hales got out of wrestling all together... Ric Flair settled back into a role he is more comfortable with than leading, which is playing his part and getting along with everyone. His opinions behind the scenes don't carry the weight you might expect from a former WCW booker. His power was definitely usurped by other wrestlers... Antonio Pena may return to the list should the relationship with the WWF grow, but his influence in the U.S. in 1996 was near zero. His few U.S. events were disappointing...

WRESTLING'S TOP DRAFT PICKS

1. SHAWN MICHAELS

2. STEVE AUSTIN

3. CHRIS BENOIT

4. BRETHART

5. SHANE DOUGLAS

6. REY MISTERIO JR.

7. GIANT

8. RIC FLAIR

9. SCOTT HALL

10. KEVIN NASH

With the premise being an "expansion franchise" wrestling promotion were being formed, the following are comments made by Torch readers regarding who their top five picks would be from a pool of all currently active wrestlers worldwide. The key is to build a foundation for a promotion where the number one goal would be to stay in business and be profitable, which could require a mix of established names and younger wrestlers as part of the top five list. A list of the top 50 vote getters has been tabulated and is listed on this and the next page.

John Lowe:

(1) **Shawn Michaels.** His combination of charisma and workrate make his status as number one draft pick a no-brainer. He gives 100 percent not only at pay-per-views, but also at every house show where I've seen him. He also has the ability to carry mediocre wrestlers (i.e. Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, Sid) to very good matches. When he's in the ring with good workers, odds are the matches will be excellent.

(2) **Steve Austin.** A terrific heel who can wrestle, work the crowd, and do great interviews. Anyone who saw his short-stint in ECW knows that as good as he is in the WWF, he has the potential to be even better.

(3) **Mankind.** As good a brawler as Mankind is, he's even better behind the mic. His ECW anti-hardcore interviews were by far the best I've ever seen. I'd turn him loose in front of the camera and watch him become the thinking man's brawler once again.

(4) **Shane Douglas & Francine.** I'm a huge fan of Shane Douglas and even I'd like to see someone beat the crap out of him. It's been a long time since someone's played the smart alack heel role as well as Douglas. No overblown gimmicks, goofy costumes, or huge supporting casts, Douglas and Francine are the best heel-vallet combo in the business.

(5) **Chris Benoit.** While Benoit doesn't have the interview skills the other four posses, he more than makes up for it with his in-ring ability. He has a level of intensity and believability that would be an asset to any wrestling promotion.

Peter Parrota:

(1) **Chris Benoit** is an incredibly gifted worker who has good believable interviews and could easily have the credibility of a champion. He's intimidating, has a bodybuilder's physique, and simply put can get over with the fans.

(2) **Shane Douglas** is an excellent interview, has good workrate, and has an aura about him that makes fans despise him. He is the "ultimate" hate garnerer. He would make an exceptional lead heel.

(3) **Shawn Michaels's** interview are both of high quality and confidence. His workrate is phenomenal. He oozes of charisma from every pore and makes a great lead babyface.

(4) **Steve Austin** is into his character more than any of the above-mentioned names. He's comprised of superior interviews, great workrate, and excellent ring psychology. He is over with the fans because he is determined.

(5) **Bret Hart** is my fifth pick because he already has a ton of credibility and could give other wrestlers credibility simply by losing to them cleanly.

Jim Zordani:

(1) **Kevin Nash.** Every promotion needs a big name wrestler who the average wrestling fan knows, so I'd choose Kevin Nash because I wouldn't want to deal with Hulk Hogan. Scott Hall was another name I considered for this choice, but since he's never been a world champion, I skipped him. I would make Nash a badass heel.

(2) **Shawn Michaels.** With Nash as my number one choice, I'd have to hire one of his buddies who was capable of having outstanding matches with him or being his partner in crime. The obvious choice then is Michaels. He has been a world champion, which is a big plus. I would change his stripper gimmick immediately to something like "Superbrat" Shawn Michaels. Make him a likable guy whose only achilles heel is not being world champ. When he's not the champ, he becomes the superbrat constantly whining and interfering in his enemies' matches.

(3) **Kenta Kobashi.** With two big name American stars already aboard, my promotion needs a foreign competitor who is capable of having terrific matches with both Nash and Michaels. Kobashi would be my choice for that role. In his career thus far Kobashi has shown he can have unbelievable matches with powerful American wrestlers like Steve Williams and Stan

11. DEANMALENKO
12. SABU
13. HULK HOGAN
14. MANKIND
15. CHRISCANDIDO
16. STING
17. STEVERICHARDS
18. ELIMINATORS
19. TERRYFUNK
20. AHMEDJOHNSON
21. CHRISJERICHO
22. EDDIEGUERRERO
23. BRIANPILLMAN
24. DALLASPAGE
25. ULTIMATEWARRIOR
26. UNDERTAKER
27. VADER
28. HARLEMHEAT
29. LEXLUGER
30. SID
31. GOLDUST
32. RODDYPIPER
33. FLASHFUNK
34. PITBULL2
35. SANDMAN
36. HUNTERHELMESLEY
37. KENTAKOBASHI
38. TAZ
39. TOMMYDREAMER
40. HAYABUSA
41. DUSTINRHODES
42. OWENHART
43. MARCUSBAGWELL
44. PSICOSIS
45. SYXX
46. KONNAN
47. PUBLICENEMY
48. JERRYLAWLER
49. MIKEAWESOME
50. DISCOINFERNO

Hansen. I'd think, given enough time, he'd have very good bouts with Nash. The outstanding bouts with Michaels are a given. Another plus to having Kobashi is that he could help groom younger wrestlers. See Jun Akiyama as evidence of that. To get Kobashi over, I'd have him pin Michaels cleanly in the middle.

(4) **Rey Mysterio Jr.** Rey Jr. is the most exciting wrestler on the planet. I'd need him in my promotion to bolster the junior heavyweight division and to entice other Hispanic superstars into my promotion. In my mind Mysterio Jr. is a "no brainer" top five pick.

(5) **Chris Benoit.** He is a very unique wrestler. He has the ability to make average or less than average wrestlers look very good. Benoit also has developed a great persona in recent months and is no longer the vanilla type wrestler he was for years. Benoit could also recruit other New Japan wrestlers to complete in my promotion.

Wrestlers who just missed being in the top five were Steve Austin, Shinjiro Otani, The Giant, Scott Hall, Jun Akiyama, Shinya Hashimoto, and Manami Toyota.

Mike Omansky:

I would want instant credibility and wrestlers who can sell tickets, not just perform. **Roddy Piper** would be the best for ticket sales. **Steve Austin** has the potential to be the ultimate heel because of his persona backed up by true in-ring ability. **Bret Hart** is one of the few draws. **Sting** could be one of the biggest if someone in power would pay attention. **Rey Mysterio Jr.** could be a major attraction.

Betty Schaffer:

(1) **Marc Mero.** He has star power and is world champion caliber.

(2) **Shawn Michaels.** His charisma and workrate is second to none.

(3) **Bret Hart.** He is a consummate professional.

(4) **Dean Malenko.** The king of holds and counterholds.

(5) **Eddie Guerrero.** He has the energy and ability to do everything.

Scott Druyan:

(1) **Chris Benoit.** He can go head to head with anyone in the business. His interview ability, while not great, has shown signs of improvement.

(2) **Bret Hart.** He is a multiple champion with great ring presence and could wrestle a variety of different main event opponents.

(3) **Steve Austin.** A very established worker with a very good heel persona and excellent interview ability. He can get heat and maintain it.

(4) **Dean Malenko.** Rightfully billed as the man of 1,0001 holds. He gives the business credibility.

(5) **Shane Douglas.** Much like Austin, a lot of the same attributes. Somebody definitely to build a new promotion around.

Joe Stuntebeck:

(1) **Tommy Dreamer.** The consummate team player. He gives everything he has every time and never asks to win a title. I'll respect him forever.

(2) **Chris Benoit.** He can work any style, do it well, and gives a killer heel interview.

(3) **Sabu.** Do you remember the idea of Terry Funk having a great match with a broomstick? Sabu could do that, too. It would not be a great

technical match, but it would have the crowd on its feet the whole time.

Kathy Kramer:

(1) **Ric Flair.** The lynch pin still has something left. His interviews and ring savvy would be of value.

(2) **Diamond Dallas Page.** He continues to improve. He is great on interviews. Barring injuries, I'm looking forward to seeing him get better.

(3) **Dean Malenko.** He's fun to watch and is the best technical wrestler around.

(4) **Vader.** A monster heel and the ultimate bad guy.

(5) **The Giant.** Another guy with a future in the business, more agile than Don Leo Jonathan. If used correctly, will be a superstar.

Russell S. Crems:

I'd pick **Ric Flair** for credibility, **Chris Benoit** as the star to build around, **Steve Austin** as another star to build around, **The Giant** for his youth and marketability, and the **BWO** for comedy.

Jesus Cortez Jr.

(1) **Sabu.** Let's see, he's a brilliant worker. He's popular with the fans. His style can be worked with anybody. And he'll provide some cool highlights to sell TV stations on the show.

(2) **Hayabusa.** I can't believe no one has picked up this guy in the U.S., so he can be the unknown ultra talent. Every wrestling company should have one of those.

(3) **Taz.** Once again, his style works with anyone and his wicked moves will get people's attention.

(4) **Mankind.** First off, I'd make him change his name back to Cactus Jack. Second, he will help bring in the hardcore fans.

(5) **Terry Funk.** He may be old, but if you have to have a legend in your group, he's the one. He along with the other four will sell plenty of tickets.

Pete Houston:

Shawn Michaels is number one. **Kevin Nash** would be next. He's funny and cocky. **B** is known the world over and is a reliable, good worker. **Steve Austin** kicks ass. **Scott Hall** can play a great heel or a face.

Bill DeRosier:

I'd start with **Shawn Michaels** because he could make any match watchable. Everybody should have a wrestler who sacrifices his body like **Sabu**. Every promotion should have a heel as strong as **Shane Douglas**. Every group should have a flat-out brawler like **Tommy Dreamer**. **Bret Hart** would be a technical wrestler to build around.

Tom Ferreira:

(1) **Rey Mysterio Jr.** Given the proper push and opponents, he could be the biggest star in wrestling if he doesn't take too many risks and cripple himself. I'd have him work with the Hart to add a little more versatility to his repertoire. He's a good enough worker to be welcome in any promotion in the world.

(2) **Shawn Michaels.** He still has the charisma to be a major crossover star in the real world, but I'd work on reigning in his attitude, somewhat and letting him know that being a prima donna may fly with McMahon, but the ticket buyers pay the bills.

(3) **Kevin Nash.** Besides having the size and strength to be a credible dominating force, he may well be the funniest man to ever step behind the mic while being interviewed. Outside the ring he's a charming, classy guy, and others should follow his example.

(4) **Paul "Giant" Wight** is an incredible talent for his size and is also a classy, well-spoken man outside the ring.

(5) **Sabu.** If he could ever settle into a major promotion, once he gets a national audience viewing him, he could put butts in the seats. This guy could make a promoter very wealthy.

Patrick McNeill:

I'm starting my own promotion, Atlantic States Wrestling Alliance, this year so I have more than a passing interest in this.

(1) **Sting.** When he's not dressed up as the Crow, he has the body, above average workrate, and charisma to be the top face in the sport. Michaels doesn't appeal to the new 18-34 male demographic that the sport is targeting. Bret is on the downside of a great career, and he was never meant to be the franchise babyface.

(2) **The Giant.** He is the best big-man in the sport today. He has proven himself as an effective heel and will prove that he can work an Andre style match as a babyface in 1997. His size alone helps make him a draw. And he's from Lexington County, S.C., so I could really use him down here.

(3) **Taz.** A highly skilled technical wrestler with a mastery of suplexes. He is the most intimidating wrestler in the sport, with or without Bill Alfonso.

(4) **Shane Douglas** can be used as the tough guy babyface supreme or as a smart-ass, cowardly heel. The Torch Talk he did in late '94 looks like a blueprint for an effective heel. He can be used in an old school promotion or an extreme promotion.

(5) **Stone Cold** came of age in 1996. Ted DiBiase was obviously holding him back. He turned his feud with Hart, which originally looked to be a nothing feud with no issues at stake, into one of the hottest tickets of '96. (And, if all else fails, I'll have the greatest heel tag team of all time in Douglas & Austin. Can you imagine?)

Daren Sparks:

(1) **Sting.** He has been rejuvenated by his new character and is still the most charismatic, hard worker in the world.

(2) **Kevin Nash.** They don't come any cooler or tougher looking than him.

(3) **Shawn Michaels.** Although I can't stand his stupid strip teases, you can't deny his ability or work ethic.

(4) **Scott Hall.** I hate to have almost all Clique members, yet once again he is just another great worker who hits hard, has great on-camera presence, and has reached his prime.

(5) **Steve Austin.** His best years are ahead of him. And there is no doubt in my mind that he is most definitely capable of being a franchise player.

Mike McCullough:

(1) **Steve Austin.** He has all the tools needed to be my world champion. He has an excellent workrate, can tell a story in the ring, takes good bumps without overselling, and has great mic skills.

(2) **Vader.** He is the prototype for the monster heel. He can work very stiff and is very easy to get

over as a "tough" worker. I could easily build him up as a career-ender.

(3) **Eddie Guerrero.** The Rick Steamboat of the '90s, Guerrero is a solid worker, has plenty of natural charisma, and has what it takes to be the hard working, everyman fans can relate to.

(4) **Rey Misterio Jr.** A breath-taking flyer, somebody who always works hard and can put on dazzling performances at will.

(5) **Shawn Michaels.** Nobody works harder at improving themselves and few wrestlers can carry below average workers to better matches.

Kevin Perry:

I would pick **Hulk Hogan** first because I would need a recognizable name so people would watch it. **Rey Misterio Jr.** would be next because he is a great young wrestler. I could build my company around him. **Steve Austin** would be a good, established, young heel. **Shawn Michaels** would be a good, established, young babyface. And **Bret Hart** would be important because he could wrestle Michaels a lot.

E. Sayers:

(1) **Kevin Nash.** Great on-air personality, he can get over as the champion, but will do a job to get someone else over. Still young enough to build a promotion around.

(2) **Ahmed Johnson.** Big, strong, quick, very powerful, and has "Benoit-like" snap to his moves. Can get over huge as a babyface.

(3) **Dustin Rhodes.** Just a good wrestler and a good worker. Has shown he can play many diverse roles. I would use the Natural gimmick like Ric Flair's "Nature Boy" with long robes and a beautiful female manager, such as Marlena.

(4) **Chris Jericho.** Phenomenal athlete. Fast and furious moves. His enthusiasm gets him over. He could make a great heel or babyface.

(5) **Stevie Richard.** Could be a Franchise Player. He can work the mic and is really a great actor in his variety of roles. Good moves, but his heel-like personality is what makes him so good and valuable. Like Jericho, his youth and potential upside are huge.

Dylan Hales:

(1) **Steve Austin.** He is probably the most over heel (if you can call him that) the WWF's ever had. He is a great worker, a great interviewer, and he fits in as a base heel for any promotion to build on.

(2) **The Eliminators.** With the sad state that tag team wrestling is in, getting a good tag team would be essential and these guys are the best. They already have a great following from ECW fans and those who don't know them would soon grow to know them through their great wrestling skills, teamwork, and mic work. Great base for tag team wrestling.

(3) **Shawn Michaels.** Besides being extremely over with the fans, he is a great worker and performer who along with Steve Austin is the first true great wrestling project of the '90s. His ability to mix styles and the fact that he is considered the epitome of "hip" wrestlers in the '90s makes him the most over wrestler in the country.

(4) **Kenta Kobashi.** In my opinion, the most improved Japanese wrestler in the last five years. He would be a great draw in Japan and could help us win clearances there. His moves and good booking would get him over in the U.S. and

Canada.

(5) **Chris Benoit.** Benoit has proved in both ECW and WCW that his workrate alone can get him over with the fans and with the proper booking methods could be a major star.

Robb McMahon:

Chris Benoit is about ready to explode this year. If he does not given a major title reign this year it will be a shock. Once he breaks from the Horsemen, we will all see how truly gifted he is. Taz will have his best year in 1997 and will finally be thrust into the main events. His in-ring style is already top notch. **Steve Austin** will be the franchise heel in the WWF for the next couple of years. How WCW let him go is beyond my belief. **Ahmed Johnson** is a future megastar. His strength, physique, and attitude can only lead to great things. His future, however, I believe, will be as a heel. **The Eliminators** are the best tag team in the world. The most devastating loss ECW will have if they leave. Although not a fan of Kronus, Saturn is the star of the team.

Chad Vergine:

(1) **Shawn Michaels.** One of the best babyfaces and most popular in wrestling. He has great athletic ability and one of the best workrates. Also, the crowds are never quiet when he's around. My top babyface.

(2) **Bret Hart.** One of the best babyfaces around, but can also play a good rebel. I would make Bret more of a rebel in my federation. Bret's too good to be just a babyface.

(3) **Steve Austin.** My top heel. Great athletic ability, best interviews, and the most popular heel. He can be the centerpiece.

(4) **Shane Douglas.** He is my number two heel behind Stone Cold. Great athletic ability and a good interview. Has great style and he's cocky. Also a great worker behind the scenes.

Rasche Brown:

(1) **Dean Malenko.** He's the definition of wrestler. He can wrestle almost any style, heel or tweener.

(2) **Sting.** He is a great babyface with lots of charisma and wrestling skills. His name alone would draw fans.

(3) **Bret Hart.** He's a great technical wrestler who can brawl or wrestle and gives 100 percent in the ring.

(4) **Steve Austin.** A badass heel who can wrestle, draw a crowd, and get lots of heat.

(5) **Rey Misterio Jr.** A great aerial wrestler with unbelievable skills. He would draw the kids. We would make a lot of money marketing his masks, dolls, and cartoons.

Jason Recktenwald:

The Giant would be the top pick due to youth, agility, and good interviews. A top heel for years to come. **Ultimate Warrior** would be next. When he is at his best, no one can fill an arena or sell merchandise like him. **Ahmed Johnson** has the potential to be the greatest heel in wrestling. **Rey Misterio Jr.** is the great underdog everyone could cheer for. **Undertaker** would be on the list just for the Giant-Undertaker match that could result.

Eric Nelson:

I had to pick **Steve Austin** for his star power,

drawing power, attitude, and workrate, plus I think he's great. **Tommy Dreamer** is my second pick because of his charisma, his working with the crowd, and the potential matches against Austin. **Rey Misterio Jr.** would draw kids and interest the new-style fans. I had to pick **Chris Benoit** because he is the greatest wrestler in the world and his style gets people hooked. **Ahmed Johnson** is the brawler of the group and he has so many years ahead of him, he could be the future superstar.

Chris Palmatier:

(1) **Shawn Michaels** is the best wrestler in the world even though I hate him.

(2) **Vader** is the best big man in the business. The WWF doesn't know how to use him, but he would be my world champion. I'd bring back Harley Race to manage him.

(3) **Taz**. He is very underrated because he wrestles in ECW. No one is as tough as Taz. If the WWF or WCW could get this man, it would put that organization over the top.

(4) **The Giant**. I don't understand why WCW is wasting their time with Hulk Hogan when Giant should be the man on top.

(5) **Chris Candido & Sunny**. These are odd choices, but Chris is so underrated, he is a veteran yet he is only 24. The WWF really didn't do well with this guy. He is a great wrestler and Sunny would have to come along, too. The WWF really messed up with this can't miss talent. And Sunny can do it all.

Henrik Rautila:

(1) **Chris Benoit**. At his ripe age, he is the most experienced wrestler in the country. He is the best worker WCW has and can play any role and can wrestle any type of opponent.

(2) **Eddie Guerrero**. He has great experience in wrestling and could be a lead babyface.

(3) **Shawn Michaels**. He would be perfect as the top heel of the promotion. The organization would be built around him and he would have the most interview time. His tremendous charisma and athleticism would finally be at its best against Benoit and Guerrero.

(4) **Bret Hart**. He would be the veteran every New Generation wrestler would have to beat before being considered a top star.

(5) **Kenta Kobashi**. He is the best worker in the world. He would be built as the experienced veteran who newcomers beat to have their career skyrocket, plus he would occasionally beat the top names to keep his credibility.

Joseph Souza:

I picked the **Giant** because he is young and has charisma. He would be a legitimate heavyweight champ. **Rey Misterio Jr.** would be the lightweight champ. His ability to amaze people and his reputation would fill the seats. **Doug Furnas & Phil LaFon** would be the tag team of choice. They could pull out good matches from young talent as well as teach them. **Steve Austin** would make an awesome heel and interview. He could challenge all of the above because he is versatile and medium sized.

Eric Krol:

I still believe fans would go nuts for a promotion that stressed workrate and charismatic characters over a well-defined heel-face structure. For that

reason I selected **Shawn Michaels**, a great worker and charismatic tweener; **Scott Hall** is a good, if often-lazy worker who can play a cocky face or heel; **Steve Austin**, a great heel who is still cheered; **Rey Misterio Jr.** to anchor the high-flyers position, although I wouldn't limit him to the cruiserweight division, and **Chris Benoit**, who can work any style well, but admittedly would need a great manager.

David Frey:

(1) **Hulk Hogan, Scott Hall, Kevin Nash, Sting, Shawn Michaels**. I would take the top three of the NWO, the best babyface and best worker of the heavyweight ranks. I would make them all NWO and build my promotion around them. You take advantage of all the publicity surrounding them and bring in others to take them on. Forget picking the five "best workers" because part of the charge is making the promotion profitable.

Bob Nichnadowicz:

(1) **Shawn Michaels**. The Ric Flair of his generation, equally as good whether it be as a heel or a face.

(2) **Shane Douglas**. The WWF has the greatest heel in the business right under their noses and let him slip away.

(3) **Steve Austin**. They didn't let him get away. Douglas and Austin as allies would just be incredible.

(4) **Mankind**. Like Michaels, incredible as a heel or a face. His interviews and brawls are top notch.

(5) **Eddie Guerrero**. Talent and charisma. WCW did so little in presenting him to the fans, but he got over anyway.

Al Galdi:

A major key to a successful promotion, from what I've been able to gather, is to feature guys who can both wrestle and give good interviews. This recipe satisfies the hardcores as well as the casual fan looking for some entertainment. **Chris Benoit's** superb wrestling skills, killer intensity, and sophisticated eloquence make him the ideal world champion. **Steve Austin** and **Cactus Jack** would make a great heel tandem, laying people out left and right and giving "We don't give a damn about nobody!" interviews. **Stevie Richards** provides an outlet for humor and satire and would thrive in his own segment, a la Piper's Pit. The guy can work, too. **Rey Misterio Jr.** is so amazing and revolutionary people can't help but be impressed.

Brian Yursha:

(1) **Shawn Michaels**. He is a great athlete who can have classic matches. He is great on interviews and takes incredible bumps. People pay to see Michaels because he always works hard.

(2) **Steve Austin**. He does the best interviews and he always gives a good effort in all of his matches. He also takes great bumps. He is an incredible wrestler.

(3) **Chris Benoit**. He is great on interviews, he can brawl, he can do aerial maneuvers, and he can have some great technical matches.

(4) **Hunter Hearst Helmsley**. He is definitely a future star in wrestling. I see a lot of potential in him. He is a great wrestler and people would pay to see him because he is a great athlete.

(5) **Chris Jericho**. Like Helmsley, he is a future

star in wrestling and has potential. Jericho has some incredible athletic maneuvers. He is always working hard in his matches and is great at aerial maneuvers. My promotion would be great and profitable because all of my top five are incredible athletes who have a history of a great work ethic.

John Molinaro:

(1) **Rey Misterio Jr.** Because his aerial ability is unparalleled in this world. When it comes to working several feet off the canvas, Rey Jr. has no peer.

(2) **Chris Benoit**. Because of his stiff working style and because he has the incredible gift of having a great match with even the most meager opponent.

(3) **Steve Austin**. He has the ability in 1997 to break out as the best heel this sport has seen since the late Love Machine Art Barr.

(4) **Eddie Guerrero**. In terms of heart and being a class act, Guerrero has no equal. His attitude is the kind you would want to rub off onto others.

(5) **Shinjiro Otani**. His worth ethic and workrate make him the best wrestler in the world today. He can drag the most hapless opponent to a four star match and he sells his ass off like nobody else.

Chris Bernes:

(1) **Shawn Michaels**. He is the leader. The guy gives everything and then then some to bring the crowd to life.

(2) **Taz**. He's my lead heel. The cheap shot man with an abundance of technical prowess.

(3) **Rey Misterio Jr.** He keeps all of us guessing while dazzling us.

(4) **Steve Austin**. He is the pivot man. He can brawl and grapple. He's a popular heel.

(5) **Buh Buh Ray Dudley**. Our comic relief comes from a strange fellow who can make us laugh, but still give a hell of a show. Each member gives a little something for everyone, and that screams "success."

Robert O'Connor:

(1) **Shawn Michaels**. A very good worker with tons of charisma. Michaels seems like the best choice to build a promotion around.

(2) **Ahmed Johnson**. A big, muscular wrestler who can work like Ahmed doesn't come alone all that often. He could be valuable as a babyface or a heel.

(3) **Rey Misterio Jr.** He's the best high-flyer in the world and he's still in his early 20s. If you're planning a cruiserweight division, he's the obvious choice around which to build it.

(4) **The Head Hunters**. It still baffles me that neither the WWF nor WCW has signed these guys yet. I can remember how my jaw dropped the first time I saw the larger of the two execute a graceful moonsault. They would definitely get people talking.

(5) **Chris Benoit**. Benoit can work almost any style of a match you can think of. His intensity earned him a lot of new supporters this past year.

Ted Bauer:

You can't win a championship without a coach. Similarly, you can't have a successful wrestling promotion without an excellent booker to book compelling feuds that fans will shell out cash to see. For that reason, my first pick is Paul Heyman.

As far as wrestlers, my top pick is **Shawn Michaels**. He's charismatic, good on the mic, and better in the ring. He will sell tickets no matter what. Humor plays a factor in profitability as well. Michaels is cocky, but the funniest man in wrestling is **Steve Richards**. He is a lackey now, but on the verge of main eventing, and that's the role I have for him. I then select **Scott Hall**. He can be a heel or a face because he's attractive, cocky, funny, and good in the ring. If I need a monster heel for Michaels and Richards to battle, Hall could be the man. I also pick the **Giant** who will be the man the other three battle consistently. Every promotion needs a monster heel to be successful, and Giant is mine.

Brian Arnold:

(1) **Shane Douglas**. Shane is my first pick because he possesses the ability to make everyone hate him. And he can give a great interview. And his work in the ring is unparalleled. He's worked with people from Cactus Jack to Raven to Pitbull2—all matches worthy of watching.

(2) **Undertaker**. He can mystify an audience with his presence along with his remarkable ability for a big man.

(3) **Raven**. As with Undertaker, Raven, always keeps you thinking. He gets fan really involved in the matches and gets great heat.

(4) **Rey Misterio Jr.** The only reason I pick Rey Jr. is that he is hot. I've seen him wrestle and he is excitement all the time. At the rate he's going, he won't be wrestling for long, therefore I want to get as much excitement out of him before his ankles and knees go out.

(5) **Hulk Hogan**. Undeniably the most popular wrestler of all time. He has the following whether it's the kids, teens, or adults.

Ronald Millsaps Jr.:

(1) **Sting**. Listen to how the fans scream for him to make an appearance on Nitro. He is clearly wrestling's number one guy right now.

(2) **Hulk Hogan**. He is as good as a heel as he was as a face back in '84.

(3) **Shawn Michaels**. He has the best workrate of anyone in the business. He is effective as a face, maybe even more so as a heel.

(4) **Kevin Nash**. His coming to Nitro coincided with Nitro's push in the ratings wars.

(5) **Ric Flair**. After all of these years the fans still love him. He puts on a show with the best of them.

Chuck Kaye:

(1) **Shawn Michaels**. He is not just the present, but for at least the next five years the future as well. He is not just the most charismatic, most talented, best worker, but has the greatest chance to achieve mainstream celebrity.

(2) **Arn Anderson**. He is everything a veteran wrestler should be and more. Who better to have around for the younger wrestlers to learn from.

(3) **Steve Austin**. He is already superb and hasn't even come close to realizing his potential.

(4) **Steve Richards**. He still has the most untapped superstar potential of any wrestler currently working.

(5) **Sabu**. The lunatic of pro wrestling. I want him on my team.

Gary Shirker:

The **Giant** may be the best big man to ever enter the sport. In a short time, he has developed excellent mic work and strong in-ring skills. **Shane Douglas** seems to be the best at drawing heat right now. The fans really hate him and scream whenever he's getting his tail kicked. **Shawn Michaels** constantly takes pride in his match quality and could have an outstanding match with anyone. That would guarantee a good match on any show. **Taz** would also be in due to many of the same reasons as **Shane Douglas**. **Steve Austin** still does the best mic work in the business right now. I really think strong heels are more important than strong babyfaces to make a promotion successful. People seem to want to watch the heels lose more than watch babyfaces win.

Phil Pisano: I would pick **Bret Hart**, **Shawn Michaels**, **Steve Austin**, **Diamond Dallas Page**, and **Chris Benoit**. All five have good interviews, know how to get a reaction, and can wrestle with anybody. The Hitman gives you instant credibility and is a true champion. Michaels can seemingly get a four-star match out of anybody and is just fun to watch. Austin is on a bigtime role and has unmatched potential. Page knows how to get the job done and should be a heavyweight champion before he is done. Benoit never makes a mistake in the ring and always gets the crowd pumped. The possibility of matches just within these five wrestlers are incredible, and these five could have good matches with many others.

Alan Sailors:

(1) **Sting**. Kids and adults love Sting. He's the best babyface in the business and doesn't need to have a belt to draw fans.

(2) **Ric Flair**. He is recognized by the people of the South and Southeast states. He will always draw fans and works well as a heel or babyface.

(3) **Hulk Hogan**. I despise him for his arrogance, but I want to make money. The midwest and eastern states still like him. I'd keep him as a heel because people love to hate him.

(4) **Marcus Bagwell**. Still young enough to be honed into a champion. Handsome enough to keep women interested in watching wrestling.

(5) **Shawn Michaels**. He's a hard worker who makes everyone look good. He can hold any belt credibly and give a great interview either as a babyface or a heel.

Bryan Meyers:

(1) **Ultimate Warrior**. He is the freshest of the sport's proven draws. Warrior would provide name value to the promotion.

(2 & 3) **Kevin Nash** and **Shawn Michaels**. As a team they are a hot act and have the experience of being on top of their respective promotions. Michaels is also the best overall total package of a wrestler in the world. No one can work, interview, or show great charisma like he can.

(4) **Rey Misterio Jr.** He is the best small man in wrestling today. A highlight reel of his spots could fill an entire week of programming.

(5) **Sabu**. His gimmick as the suicidal crazy guy from India is great. His craziness would be a way to catch the eye of the casual fan.

Richard Zack:

(1) **Mike Awesome**. The most underused man in wrestling. He has size, power, and the ability to fly.

Lex Luger wishes he could be such a total package. The Kamikaze Awesome Bomb off the top is the ultimate finisher. He would be my big man cornerstone.

(2) **Psicosis**. He bangs his body off of tables, railing, and the floor itself. Imagine he and Dreamer putting on a dream match. They'd fall off balconies, ladders, the roof of the arena. He is the high risk taker.

(3) **Steve Austin**. When WCW let Austin go, they didn't just drop the ball, they fumbled it in the endzone and the WWF scored. He is the best interview going right now and is a great worker. I think I could book one of the best feuds in history with Austin vs. Awesome.

(4) **Hayabusa**. This guy is right there as a premier high flyer. Whoever booked him in a year of FMW gimmick matches should be fired. It is so hard to pull off a shooting star press off of barbed wire. He and Psicosis could trade moves off of ladders, culminating with his corkscrew moonsault.

(5) **Sean Waltman**. I'd go back to the Lightning Kid name, and drop the NWO doofus act, and start up the aerial assault again, such as the Kid-Sabu classic at the Minneapolis GrandSlam event a few years back. The WWF never used him to his full potential, but what else would you expect from them.

Jason Smith:

(1) **Chris Jericho**. I would draft Chris Jericho first because he's the best all-around wrestler in the sport, has dynamite charisma, and has shown potential behind the mic. He would be booked to be my world champion.

(2) **Tommy Dreamer**. He would be drafted because he's the best brawler in the sport and takes chances with foreign objects many wouldn't even consider. He is the "King of Hardcore" and he'd be my U.S. Champ.

(3) **Rey Misterio Jr.** What can I say about him? He is the greatest aerialist not only now, but of all time. He'd be my franchise cruiserweight with options to go further.

(4) **Chris Benoit**. He would make it because he's the most intense man I've ever seen in that ring, and he has a tremendous workrate.

(5) **Steve Austin** would make the list because he is fantastic in all areas, not to mention he is the best talker going today.

Greg Pilfrey:

(1) **Bret Hart**. He is the best wrestler in the business right now. He is young enough and athletic enough to be the leader of any federation for a long time. With the right competition, you can have a realistic and profitable federation.

(2) **Steve Austin**. He is a great brawler and a good athlete.

(3) **Rey Misterio Jr.** Anyone who partakes in this mock draft and doesn't pick Misterio Jr. as one of their top five doesn't know what they're talking about. He is a great wrestler and should be made bigger than what he is. That is why he is my number three pick.

(4) **Chris Benoit**. I guess I could have picked a bigger name than the Canadian Crippler, but his hard work ethic would be important to the organization.

(5) **Scott Hall**. He is way underutilized in WCW, but used correctly in the WWF.

Notice none of my top five picks are all that old,

but also they are company men who do what they are told. Shawn Michaels is an example of someone who is talented, but who is hard to control. Lex Luger, Sid, and Kevin Nash aren't on the list because I find that faster guys are more fun to watch than the big, huge guys.

Edezal Carr:

(1) **Shawn Michaels.** The babyface the female fans love while the males think he's cool and emulate him.

(2) **Dean Malenko.** A consistent worker who can carry rookies to good matches.

(3) **Steve Austin.** The rebel heel who is cheered instead of booed. If given the right push, he would make the fans hate him so much they couldn't stop thinking about him. They would pay to see babyfaces beat him up.

(4) **Rey Misterio Jr.** The colorful, aerial wrestler the kids love. His moves are amazing.

(5) **Taz.** He can get heat from a dead crowd by doing mic work. He can turn around a match with a Tazplex. The fans hate him. They want to see him hurt, yet they respect him, too.

Chris Clark:

(1) **Shawn Michaels.** You gotta have the Heartbreak Kid. Women cry for him and kids die for him. He is among the best in workrate, charisma, interviews, and dedication. A true MVP.

(2) **Vader.** Perhaps the last of the killer heels, Vader is an excellent big man and can work a great match when he wants to.

(3) **Owen Hart.** Every promotion needs a whipping boy and Owen is it. He talks well and works hard and flies high. He is classic underdog material.

(4) **Steve Austin.** He is a can't miss young talent who can wrestle 60 minute marathons or brawl in the streets.

(5) **The Giant.** I almost hate to do this but every promotion needs a freak. He looks impressive live and on the screen. He's young enough to make money for years ahead.

John Siska:

My five picks are **Shane Douglas, Taz, Steve Austin, Rey Jr.** and **Bret Hart.** They are all established. They can all brawl. They can all adapt to each others' styles. You have two of the most hated (Taz, Sabu), two of the most popular (Bret, Rey Jr.) and one who is really a tweener (Austin), only he really isn't a heel or a babyface. Now, of course, to really make this category fair, you would need to pick 15-25 wrestlers so you could build some storylines.

Mike Wenrich:

My top five draft picks for my dream organization would be **Ric Flair, Eddie Guerrero, Steve Austin, Chris Benoit,** and **Rey Misterio Jr.** Flair may be getting up there in age, but he could jump-start any promotion. His experience and influence would certainly make any wrestling organization worth watching. And how can you go wrong with arguably the greatest and most popular wrestler in history? Guerrero is without a doubt the future of babyfaces wrestlers. He is the next Rick Steamboat in terms of class and ability. Austin gives great interviews and is the perfect bad guy. He would eventually replace Flair as the top heel. Benoit is all business when he hits the ring. He's

currently one of the best all-around wrestlers in the world and his mic work has improved in the past few years. Rey Jr. is truly one of a kind. He knows more moves than all the muscleheads combined.

Tim Dills:

(1) **Rey Misterio Jr.** A classic underdog and, as is said, everybody loves an underdog. Misterio is also exciting in the ring and provides a more modern style of action, something which might hook new fans.

(2) **The Giant** comes in second. He isn't a bad athlete and at times has been really good in the ring and on the mic. Naturally, his size would be a big attraction for any group.

(3) **Chris Benoit.** This guy can work any style and comes across as all business in the ring and behind the mic.

(4) **Terry Funk.** He can still have a maniacal heel run or a legendary face role, but more importantly he would be someone anyone could learn from, something a lot of younger wrestlers today need.

I would choose **Paul Heyman** as my booker. He seems most able to plan long term and make good use of what is available. It won't hurt to have him as a manager and on the mic from time to time, either.

Chris Zavisla:

I could go one of two ways with this—conventional picks to build a men's promotion and compete with the big two by stressing workrate and good matches. In that case, my picks would be **Shawn Michaels, Kenta Kobashi, Great Sasuke, Rey Misterio Jr.** and **Mick Foley** (not as Mankind). Or, let the big two and their millions fight it out for them and I go will the women as follows: **Manami Toyota, Mima Shimoda, Aja Kong, Hikari Fukuoka,** and **Chaparita Asari.** I could probably get any other female wrestler I darn well want for very little cash as well. Put on a weekly TV show with great matches fought at a pace that would induce a heart attack in many WCW workers, and just sit back and let it happen. You would have no more competition and it would only be a matter of marketing and merchandising.

Jason Martinez:

(1) **Steve Austin.** The best wrestler, best tweener, best interview, enough said. He does it all well.

(2) **Konnor.** If they pushed him properly, he could be a major star.

(3) **Flash Funk.** Every organization needs a high flyer. Flash would be the man to set the standard. Funk has reasonable size and his flying tactics do not look as weak as a smaller wrestlers—such as Misterio Jr.'s sometimes do against bigger guys.

(4) **Sabu.** Great brawls would be necessary in a good organization.

(5) **Sandman.** He is a cool guy and is capable of having a good match with any wrestler or brawler in wrestling.

Dan Kuester:

I would draft guys who can wrestle, who have shown they are willing to do jobs (i.e. no NWO guys), and with the exception of Flair, have many good years ahead of them. I would draft Flair because he could help with booking and I feel put

in some entertaining matches. If **Shane Douglas** does retire in 1997, it will be the biggest loss to wrestling I can remember. He is the type of wrestler who is a credit to the business. He can work in the ring as well as anyone and he gave the best interviews of 1996. I can't believe how the WWF misused this guy. I would also consider the salary the wrestlers would demand. These guys would have to draw money relative to their salary demands. **Mick Foley, Steve Austin, and Shane Douglas,** and probably the **Giant** appear to be relatively underpaid. While **Giant** and **Foley** may not be world class wrestlers, they have both shown a willingness to continue to learn new maneuvers and ways to work a match.

Joe Carrvollo:

(1) **Lex Luger.** Luger is the "man" right now in wrestling, which the promoters are blind to now. He can play a heel or a babyface. He should finally be given a real title run, not robbed every time he gets close.

(2) **Sid Vicious.** He could be the Hogan of the '80s. The only thing holding him back is the lack of top level heels to put him over, a la Roddy Piper to Hulk Hogan in the '80s. I'd let Sid be Sid, loud and crazy, and build up some heels for him to work with.

(3) **Shane Douglas.** He could be the next Ric Flair. He is a great wrestler and a phenomenal interview. He draws tremendous heat. Just watch ECW TV. I recently went to an even at the ECW Arena and believe me, the fans hate this guy. They love when he's being beaten. He's just what a promotion needs, as he said in his Torch Talk. He knows how to be a heel and how to get heel heat. He'd fit in perfectly in my promotion as the franchise heel.

(4) **Taz.** He is a bonafide bad guy with a bad attitude. He draws tremendous heat. The fans are really into him. His aura of invincibility makes him that much more of a draw. It's only a matter of time before Taz becomes a big time player. In my promotion he'd make a great fit. Feuds between he and Luger, Sid, or my fifth selection Sting would be classics.

(5) **Sting.** I was never that big on Sting, but it seems everyone else is. To give credit where credit is due, Sting has been one of the most popular wrestlers over the last ten years. He'd be my franchise babyface. Although never a great world champion, his popularity has always been top notch. He would be the defender of all that is good.

Mark Underwood:

(1) **Jerry Lawler.** You'd want someone on your payroll who can teach others how to work as a babyface, heel, or ring comic, plus pass along his psychology and interview skills.

(2) **Shane Douglas.** The best villain I've ever seen, period.

(3) **Chris Candido.** The most untapped talent of anyone currently wrestling in the U.S. You might get Sunny to work as an announcer or manager, too.

(4) **Diamond Dallas Page.** He's good in the ring, excellent at projecting a multi-faceted character on the mic, and probably could have the best face turn of anyone if done right.

(5) **Disco Inferno.** Underutilized. Great ring energy and bumps and the best at comedy. Imagine what the WWF could do with him if they cut him loose.

CHRIS ZAVISA PRESENTS

JAPAN ENCyclopedia

1996

There are over two dozen wrestling promotions in Japan. To compare and analyze them is a bit like comparing a bicycle and a Rolls Royce automobile. Both are modes of transportation capable of getting you to most destinations. However, the cost, functions, speed, and convenience of each is radically different rendering any comparison between the two almost ludicrous. But with that caveat in mind, here is the annual Japanese Encyclopedia which attempts to do just that.

A male Japanese wrestling fan in the early 1980s had one of two choices to get his pro wrestling fix. Giant Baba had his All Japan Pro Wrestling promotion and Antonio Inoki had his New Japan Pro Wrestling promotion. There was another group which provided some excellent wrestling—the Matsunaga Brothers' All Japan Women promotions. However, the Matsunagas charms were normally limited to females trying to navigate through those very tough years between childhood and adulthood.

But within a few short years along came a plethora of choices for the Japanese wrestling fan. In May 1988 the UWF was formed with stars Akira Maeda and Nobuhiko Takada. In October 1989, Atsushi Onita presented the blood and guts wonders of FMW. And in September 1990 Megame Optical czar Hachiro Tanaka opened the checkbook to start SWS. Even the safe female kingdom of the Matsunagas was challenged with the emergence of both JWP in 1986 and the LLPW group in 1992. The floodgates had been opened and nothing regarding the wrestling scene in Japan has been the same since.

The nearly 30 groups all stage professional wrestling in the hope of turning a financial profit on their investment. They are a bit like players at a game of Monopoly. Profit is the undisputed prize at the end of the gameboard. But to arrive there not only do they follow extremely different paths and strategies, some of them do not even appear to be playing the same game.

Style of product is one defining area of difference. Picture a continuum in line with all of the Japanese promotions arrayed along it. Divide the line into three distinct sections. The middle is represented by the traditional pro wrestling groups whose style can be traced back to the 1950s and Rikidozan, the founder of Japanese wrestling. The major three groups—New Japan, All Japan, and the All Japan Women are found here. Groups with slight variations on the product are also found in the center. They would include WAR, Michinoku, JWP, and LLPW.

On the extreme left of the continuum is a section dominated by the violent groups who are comfortable presenting large doses of carnage as their product's main ingredient. To achieve this they will not only use the conventional weapons of pro wrestling—tables and chairs—but have added a whole armory of lethal objects including but not limited to swords, knives, hatchets, axes, scythes, jagged glass, barbed wire of every conceivable design, nails, thumbtacks, scorpions, and even flesh-eating piranha fish. There promotions include FMW, Tokyo Pro, IWA, and Big Japan.

The right side of the continuum would be made up of groups who present pro wrestling as a real contest between two skilled athletes. Everything here is supposed to be real from the holds to the finishing maneuvers. Even their schedule is carefully arranged to add to the aura of sports reality. On this end, show business considerations are stripped away making it appear less carnival and more sport. In fact, some groups are so intent on reality that some or much of their product involves actual shooting. At other times the shooting is confined to previously agreed upon parameters designed to produce a desired result or winner. These promotions would include Pancrase, Vale-Tudo, U-Japan, Battlearts, and Rings. The UWFI was here at one time but in 1996 drifted toward the middle.

The groups in the middle are the ones that most people think of as "professional wrestling." They attempt to blend elements of athletics and show business together to reach the widest possible audience. But it would be a mistake to think that any of these groups are just like the others within their respective pigeonholes. Each adjusts the percentages of athletics and show business to produce a slightly varying style and look. At times they may drift to the right or to the left or in both directions in different matches on the same card. Especially big groups like New Japan can have so many diverse athletes that they can put on a card with all three major styles represented.

To show how these groups evolved, a detailed illustration of one may prove useful.

New Japan has always employed a traditional pro wrestling style as embodied in its founder Antonio Inoki. However, within that promotion are groups of wrestlers who favor differing styles. In the 1980s three different sub-groups developed, each working under the New Japan umbrella, but each with a varied approach to their craft.

The strict traditionalists were made up of Inoki, Seiki Sakaguchi, Kengo Kimura, Masa Saito, Riki Choshu, Tatsumi Fujinami, and a few others. They wrestled worked matches that had solid wrestling

foundations with flourishes of show biz elements such as drama or comedy thrown in. This style was very close in look and philosophy with that of All Japan with Giant Baba, Jumbo Tsuruta, Genichiro Tenryu, Yoshiaki Yatsu, and Ashura Hara.

In the 1980s two distinct other groups evolved from this base. The first were the smaller and lighter weight wrestlers classified as junior heavyweights. Many received training in Mexico and borrowed flying moves from the luchadors. The man who put this group on the map was Satoru Sayama, the first Tiger Mask. Joining him were Kuniaki Kobayashi, Dynamite Kid, Keiichi Yamada, Gran Hamada, and an ever-changing roster of Mexican imports.

The other group which evolved subscribed to the strong-style approach advocated by Karl Gotch. These wrestlers wanted to make wrestling look as real as any other genuine athletic contest. They wanted to eliminate spots such as piledrivers or dropkicks which obviously required the complete cooperation of both wrestlers to be done. In their place would be put realistic holds and finishing maneuvers right out of amateur wrestling. Among the people in this group were Akira Maeda, Nobuhiko Takada, Osamu Kido, Yoshiaki Fujiwara, and Kazuo Yamazaki.

In 1984 they left New Japan and formed the UWF. Internal problems caused the group's collapse after less than two full years in business. In the Spring of 1988 many of the same wrestlers gave it a second try under the same name and this time they appeared to get it right producing a hardcore following and a significant stream of revenue including a sold out Tokyo Dome card. However, they again succumbed to internal bickering and shattered into many different pieces early in 1991.

In March 1991 Yoshiaki Fujiwara started Pro Wrestling Fujiwara Gumi. On May 10, 1991 Takada had his first show under the UWFI banner. The very next day Akira Maeda debuted in Rings. Several of the fighters returned to Inoki and New Japan. Two years later in 1993, many younger New Japan wrestlers led by Masakatsu Funaki left New Japan forming Pancrase.

Thus New Japan in one way or another spawned no fewer than four rival promotions. But remember those junior heavyweight wrestlers who stayed with New Japan while the strong style revolution was happening? In March 1990 Gran Hamada used a mix of very young Japanese talent and Mexican wrestlers to form the Universal Wrestling Federation. Some of the best junior heavyweight talent found anywhere came out of Universal. Among those who are stars today are Ultimo Dragon, (Yoshihito Asai), The Great Sasuke (Masa

TEN BIGGEST STORIES OF 1996

(1) New Japan sells out Tokyo Dome twice in four months as 129,000 pay \$12 million on Jan. 4 and Apr. 29.

(2) Weekly Pro Wrestling magazine editor Tarzan Yamamoto succumbs to New Japan pressure and resigns in early June.

(3) UWFI collapses after participating in record breaking crowds for most of the last 16 months.

(4) All Japan gives their Triple Crown world titles to Akira Taue and Kenta Kobashi and elevates Jun Akiyama in an attempt to create a wider plateau at their highest level.

(5) New Japan continues their box office bonanza as they sell 55,000 tickets for their annual August G-1 Climax series at Sumo Hall.

(6) The promise of expansion and reality of limited wrestling dollars sees several new groups begin and several existing groups bite the dust.

(7) Hiroshi Hase, longtime number two man to New Japan booker Riki Choshu, joins with rival All Japan. Baba also adds American Sabu to increase his talent base.

(8) A special 16 different promotion show honors the memory of Rikidozan with 13 matches before 16,000 fans on June 30.

(9) The All Japan Women's promotion experiences some pains of adjustment of many veterans leave and the group is forced to emphasize many younger workers.

(10) Atsushi Onita, after a year long tease, officially renounces his retirement and returns on December 11 in Tokyo.

Other big stories: All Japan fails to sellout several mid-year Budokan shows... New Japan unifies eight junior heavyweight title belts... Samurai TV debuts to small audience on Dec. 1... Antonio Inoki's Peace Wrestle Festival a bust in L.A. on June 1... New UFC style groups debut in Japan to mixed crowd reaction...

Michinoku), Super Delphin (Monkey Magic Wakita), and the tag team of Jado & Gedo (a/k/a Bulldog KT & Cooly SZ).

When Asai departed the group in 1991, they reformed around Michinoku as Sasuke and the Michinoku Pro group was born in 1992. While there may be no direct connection between New Japan and Michinoku in the way there was between New Japan and the strong style groups, there is little doubt that the New Japan junior division was the soul and inspiration for Michinoku.

The other anchor in Japanese wrestling is Giant Baba's All Japan promotion. Directly or indirectly several groups have come from here as well. The first came from a former All Japan junior heavyweight champion who had retired five years earlier due to bad knees. In 1989 Atsushi Onita formed the Frontier Martial-arts Wrestling promotion. Within the first year it became known simply by its initials, FMW.

Over a period of time FMW evolved into a brawling, blood and guts group which constantly pushed the envelope making their product more violent than anything else in Japan. Onita turned into something of a second tier national celebrity, FMW became profitable, and the predictable split occurred as some wrestlers wanted their turn at the top. In December 1991 WING was formed and they copied the FMW style and took some of its wrestlers. This later would give rise to other violence-based groups such as IWA and Big Japan.

Although FMW and Onita have a historical connection to All Japan, there never was much the group's shared in common in the way of style. A more serious and direct split occurred from All Japan in 1990 when a rich businessman was inspired by the success of Maeda's UWF. With visions of Tokyo Dome sellouts of his own, Hachiro Tanaka formed Super World Sports—SWS. They raided All Japan taking with them many of their top stars including Baba's number two worker Genichiro Tenryu. While they also obtained some lesser names from New Japan as well, SWS most closely resembled All Japan in style and look. Nearly every other new group was attempting to survive by finding a niche which was not occupied and filling it. SWS was the first real challenge to Baba and Inoki in terms of wrestling in the same style and format.

SWS failed to make the big splash and failed to compete on the same level with All Japan and New Japan. Were it not for Tanaka's financial support, the group would have crashed and burned early in its tenure. But changes were made and the group changed its name to WAR—Wrestling and Romance—and survives still.

Over the last 18 months, Japan has seen many new groups start up hoping to find their own niche. Some are brief, ephemeral entities made up of wrestlers who bounce from one independent group to another just looking for another payday. On some cards you have wrestlers from the entire continuum, occasionally from opposite ends, booked against each other. The result is a promotion without direction and matches that can border on artistic and athletic travesties.

Two examples of very recent cards show how desperate some promoters have become to attract name wrestlers despite there being no hope of the two being able to successfully work together.

Oct. 8 the Tokyo Pro group held a show in Osaka. Tokyo Pro is from the violence-based end of the continuum although not as severe as FMW or Big Japan. The main event featured the legendary master of the fork Abdullah the Butcher doing battle against

the hand-picked heir to Lou Thesz, Nobuhiko Takada. Takada is one of the gods of the strong style movement. Abdullah seems to typify everything in wrestling that is anti-strong style. But Tokyo Pro needed two names to sell tickets and the match was made.

The fans in Osaka showed their wrestling intelligence and stayed away in droves. Only 1,200 tickets were sold and the resulting match was an abomination. Takada was provided with over 25,000 reasons to abandon his strong-style principles.

Nov. 17 at Tokyo Bay Ariake Coliseum, a new reality group debuted. U Japan is another reality-based group that is attempting to capitalize on the popularity of the Ultimate Fighting and Vale Tudo groups. Supposedly one of their initial goals was to demonstrate to the world that true fighters are vastly superior to phony pro wrestlers. They brought in one of the biggest names in the world of reality fighting, Dan Severn, winner of the UFC Ultimate tournament.

The man Severn would face was Mitsuhiro Matsunaga. Matsunaga made his reputation doing slice-and-dice matches in FMW and other violence-based groups. He will do almost anything a promoter wants including getting stabbed, burned, blown up, and wrapped in barbed wire. He has even leaped from the high balcony at Korakuen Hall and lived to tell about it. While Matsunaga may be a fearless daredevil who will place his body in harm's way, the one thing he cannot remotely do is wrestle. Even within the normal narrow confines of the FMW style, he has a reputation as one of the worst to work with in the ring.

The mismatch between Severn and Matsunaga lasted just 79 merciful seconds with Severn winning with an armbar submission. It has since come to light that U Japan could not get any other name pro to wrestle Severn and the only way Matsunaga would even consider it was if there were agreed-upon moves and a finish that would not injure him. A group that wanted to show the superiority of true fighting over fixed wrestling attempted to do so by fixing the match. Afterward, Matsunaga reminded reporters of his origins when he proclaimed that his only chance would have been to first hit Severn with a barbed wire baseball bat.

Once upon a time, all Japanese pro wrestling flowed from Rikidozan's JWA. Both Inoki (New Japan) and Baba (All Japan) started and wrestled there. There was consistency to the style and it made comparisons between the Big Two fair and easy. Some would say you were comparing apples with oranges, but at least both were round edible fruits grown on trees.

Now, Japanese pro wrestling has become so fractionalized and diverse that often you are comparing apples and cinderblocks. And even if divergent styles posed no significant problem, there are a myriad of practical differences that render comparisons less than scientific.

Some of these groups are large businesses with a corporate structure, multimillion dollar budgets, and enough front office personnel to run a small manufacturing company. Others are so small they have no office, no full time employees, and depend on the same people to set up posters, set up the ring, sell tickets, and then wrestle on the actual show. If you are not a star, you may even have to help clean up afterwards. Company headquarters may be a five year old van with balding tires and a temperamental water pump.

Some of these have a tradition that goes back 25 or 30 years. Their history has become part of the larger culture's history. Their stars are cultural icons, celebrities, politicians, and spokesmen in million dollar advertising campaigns. They have a name recognition factor that cannot be bought for any price.

Other groups are brand new, possessing a pristine freshness akin to just-printed newspaper. They have no history, no tradition, and no track record. Their wrestlers are virtual unknowns to all but the fanatical hardcore wrestling fans. They could walk through a busy Tokyo street at 5 p.m. and scarcely a head would turn.

A wrestling show may be held in the cavernous Tokyo Dome, a baseball stadium where the rent starts in seven figures. More than 60,000 seats can be sold for prices from a low of \$40 to over \$300. A successful event at the Dome can bring in over six million dollars. Other shows are held in small high school gyms where fans stand due to lack of folding chairs. A crowd of 200 is considered normal and a success is declared if all expenses are covered and you can purchase enough gas to get to the next town.

Some promotions have direct relationships with the major networks. Their product is produced by highly skilled technicians using state-of-the-art equipment. Their potential audience is in the tens of millions. Other groups film their events with one or two handheld cameras and feverishly compete to get them shown for free on small stations accessible to greatly diminished numbers. And for the newest, most financially strapped groups at the bottom, there is no coverage at all.

RATING THE TOP TEN

When I first started the yearly reviews of the Japanese wrestling scene in 1991, the number of active promotions was around ten. Even though there are twenty-some promotions now, the focus will remain on the top ten, including analysis of their major strengths and weaknesses, major achievements of the year, and a list of their better workers and major events.

Selecting the top ten this year has not been easy. The number one selection was easy, as it was last year. The second spot seems automatic almost by default. Almost everyone with any knowledge agrees on those first two. The debate begins with number three. I spoke to or surveyed a half dozen people who see almost all of what is available from Japan and who have a broad base of knowledge about the world of Japanese wrestling. More so than in any past years, there was precious little agreement about almost any spots from number three to ten. Each person polled had wildly differing choices and each had fairly sound reasons for those choices. The following are my picks, taking into consideration the arguments of the others polled.

#1—NEW JAPAN

Position in 1995: #1

Years in Business: 25

New Japan Pro Wrestling is the most profitable wrestling company in the entire world. For most of 1996 they continued to have the scrapbook year they had in 1995. They did not slow down or show evidence of any problems until the last three months of the year. Nobody, not in Japan, not in the United States, not in Mexico, came even close to achieving

what New Japan did. They are the standard of excellence against which all other wrestling promotions must be measured.

Strengths: They have the largest and deepest roster of talent in the entire wrestling industry... They have the proven ability to stage events of high quality ranging from the opening bout through the main events, from house shows to stadium spectacles... Their booking does an excellent job of playing to the strengths and weaknesses of their wrestlers... The front office produces a stream of revenue unmatched by anyone else through skillful scheduling and textbook marketing... Their weekly hour long TV show on the Asahi Network is well-produced and seen throughout Japan... They have the ability to periodically make working alliances with other promotions and always emerge on top at the conclusion of the runs...

Weaknesses: The roster is so large and diverse that some wrestlers can get lost in the shuffle or fail to get properly pushed for periods of time... The year-end alliance with Big Japan has proven to be a pale imitation of the previous record-setting "feud" with the UWFI... The alliance with the U.S. based World Championship Wrestling has proved mediocre at best. WCW's hottest angle—the NWO—needs Japanese stars to make it work in Japan... The stars at the promotion's highest level—Shinya Hashimoto, Masa Chono, and Keiji Muto—are not on the same level as those of its chief rival, All Japan...

1996 Highpoints: 1/4 at the Tokyo Dome (64,000*, \$6 million gate), Nobuhiko Takada beat Keiji Muto to win the IWGP World Title... 2/25 at Tokyo Sumo Hall (11,500*), Jushin Liger & Muto beat UWFI's Takada & Yuhi Sano... 3/1 at Tokyo Budokan Hall (16,500*), Takada beat Shiro Koshinaka to retain the IWGP Title... 3/20 in Nagoya (11,000*), Yamazaki upset Chono, Liger beat Otani to retain the IWGP Junior Title... 3/26 at Tokyo Gym (10,305), Shiro Koshinaka & Tatsumi Fujinami won eight-team tag tournament... 4/29: Tokyo Dome (65,000*, \$6 million), Hashimoto beat Takada to retain the IWGP World Title in the best of the last three Dome shows... 6/17 at Tokyo Budokan Hall (13,500), SkyDiving J card, Great Sasuke beat Black Tiger (Eddie Guerrero) in the finals... 8/2–8/6 at Tokyo Sumo Hall (five nights selling 97 percent of the 55,000 available aggregate tickets), Riki Choshu wins the G-1 Climax tournament, Sasuke wins the tournament to unify eight junior titles... 9/16 in Nagoya (11,000*), Hashimoto beat Chono and the Big Japan "feud" began... 9/23 in Yokohama (17,000*), Kensuke Sasaki beat Koshinaka in the WCW–New Japan tournament finals... 10/20 in Kobe (6,800), Great Muta beat Jushin Liger in one of the year's wildest and most colorful New Japan matches... 11/1 in Hiroshima (7,000), Scott Norton & Hashimoto beat Muto & Rick Steiner to win the Super Grade tag team tournament... 12/1 in Nagoya (10,000), Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Yamazaki & Takayuki Iizuka to retain the IWGP Tag Titles... 12/10 in Osaka (6,500), Hashimoto beat Nakanishi to retain the IWGP World Hvt. Title...

#2—ALL JAPAN

Position in 1995: #2

Years in Business: 25 1/2

The group founded by Giant Baba again gets the runner-up spot almost by default. In past years they were challenged by the All Japan Women's group,

but not this time. The Big Three became the Big Two, almost mirroring the situation in the U.S. All Japan held their position but there is little doubt the group slid backward. For the first time in many years they failed to sellout several events in the Tokyo area, most notably their Budokan Hall shows with more than 2,000 empty seats staring back at them. Last year scalpers were making money off of Baba's Budokan events.

Strengths: All Japan has the three best male wrestlers found anywhere in the world in Mitsuharu Misawa, Toshiaki Kawada, and Keita Kobashi. No group comes even close to that type of concentration of talent. And what makes it a double bonus is all three are at the top of the heavyweight division and are constantly in contention for the major belts and titles... On major cards, particularly the Budokan events, they consistently produce the best main events found on any card. This is true of both singles and tag team matches... Their conservative booking style has firmly anchored the promotion making it one of the world's most stable and dependable wrestling groups... New talent additions of Hiroshi Hase and Sabu added to 1995's acquisition of Gary Albright are finally stirring new ingredients into a very old mix. The return of Steve Williams after a year away also helped... While it is not what it used to be, they still have a weekly TV show on a major network that has a potential audience of millions...

Weaknesses: For the first time in many years the group appeared to lose appeal in the Tokyo area. Erosion of the base fans is the first sign of future widespread problems... Fans perceive the promotion is doing the same old thing. There are no new feuds or catchy angles to capture the fans' imagination and ticket money... The group's style appeals to older fans who prefer their pro wrestling the old fashioned way. While they have a junior heavyweight champion, you could argue about whether they have a legitimate division for him to fight in. Compared to New Japan and their junior division, they are light years behind... Expectations of a hot new feud with the UWFI appear to have been dashed by years end leaving many fans more frustrated than ever. In the fall, fans were talking about next year's dream matches of Misawa vs. Takada, Kobashi vs. Takada, and Kawada vs. Takada. While things could change, it appears Baba failed to put the deal together... While they still have a weekly network TV show, it is only 30 minutes in length and they sometimes waste airtime with midcard bouts that prove dull and uninteresting while longer main events are carved up to fit into the timeslot...

1996 Highpoints: 1/24 Matsumoto (3,600), Stan Hansen & Gary Albright beat Toshiaki Kawada & Akira Taue to win the All Japan tag titles... 2/20 in Morioka (2,650), Kawada & Taue beat Hansen & Albright to reclaim the tag titles... 3/2 in Tokyo at Budokan (16,300*), Misawa beat Albright to retain the Triple Crown Title... 3/31 in Nagoya (6,500), Kawada fought Taue to a 30 minute draw and Misawa beat Kobashi in the annual Carnival Tournament... 4/20 in Tokyo at Budokan Hall (16,500*), Taue beat Williams to retain the Triple Crown... 5/24 in Sapporo (5,100), Taue pinned Misawa to capture the Triple Crown for the first time... 6/7 in Tokyo at Budokan Hall (16,300 reported), Taue beat Kawada to retain the Triple Crown... 7/24 in Tokyo at Budokan Hall (15,000), Kobashi beat Taue to capture the Triple Crown for the first time, Kikuchi beat longtime foe Masa Fuchi to capture the PWF Jr. Title... 8/31 Baba met with

TOP 25 MALE WRESTLERS

1. Mitsuharu Misawa (AJ/1 in '95)
2. Kenta Kobashi (AJ/2)
3. Toshiaki Kawada (AJ/3)
4. Shinjiro Otani (NJ/7)
5. Great Sasuke (Mich/5)
6. Shinya Hashimoto (NJ/17)
7. Chis Benoit (NJ/4)
8. Super Delfin (Mich/16)
9. Shiro Koshinaka (NJ/28)
10. Keiji Muto (NJ/10)
11. Masa Chono (NJ/12)
12. Jun Akiyama (AJ/25)
13. Nobuhiko Takada (UWF/19)
14. Jushin Liger (NJ/21)
15. Taka Michinoku (Mich/NR)
16. Black Tiger (NJ/6)
17. Akira Taue (AJ/20)
18. Sabu (AJ/9)
19. Ultimo Dragon (WAR/22)
20. Tiger Mask (Mich/NR)
21. Johnny Ace (AJ/23)
22. Steve Williams (AJ/NR)
23. Gran Naniwa (Mich/NR)
24. Yoshinari Ogawa (AJ/NR)
25. Koji Kanemoto (NJ/NR)

Collective Rankings by Promotion

(#1. wrestler gets 25 points, #2 gets 24 points, and so on.)

(1) New Japan—9 wrestlers, 132 pts.

(1995—11 wrestlers, 125 pts.)

(2) All Japan—9 wrestlers, 114 pts.

(1995—8 wrestlers, 121 pts.)

(3) Michinoku—5 wrestlers, 59 pts.

(1995—2 wrestlers, 45 pts.)

(4) UWF—1 wrestler, 13 pts.

(1995—1 wrestler, 7 pts.)

(5) WAR—1 wrestler, 7 pts.

(1995—1 wrestler, 4 pts.)

UWF management and attempted to lay groundwork for future talent trading... 9/5 in Tokyo at Budokan Hall (14,500), Williams & Johnny Ace beat Jun Akiyama & Misawa for the tag titles, Kobashi pinned Hansen... 9/29 Baba announced the signing of former New Japan star Hiroshi Hase... 10/18 in Tokyo at Budokan (14,000), Kobashi fought Kawada to a 60 minute draw in a Triple Crown match... 11/16 in Tokyo at Korakuen (2,100*), Misawa & Akiyama fought Williams & Ace to a 30 minute draw to open the tag tournament and as the tour progressed the new format of every team wrestling every other team twice resulted in more upsets than in previous years... 11/29 in Sapporo (5,150), Misawa & Akiyama beat Taue & Kawada and Sabu & Albright got a rare win over Kobashi & Patriot... 12/6 in Tokyo at Budokan (16,300*), Kawada & Taue beat Misawa & Akiyama to win the tournament in a five star classic...

THE SECOND TIER

What was formerly known as Japan's Big Three this year became Japan's Big Two. Due to widespread loss of talent, the All Japan Women's promotion went to what sports writers have tagged "a rebuilding year." Four groups seemed to be able to produce shows that attracted audiences smaller than New Japan and All Japan, but consistently larger than the fringe groups constantly fighting for economic survival. They are All Japan Women, FMW, RINGS, and Pancrase.

AJW and FMW run a full-time schedule. AJW runs 200-250 event a year while FMW runs 125-160. RINGS and Pancrase pretty much stick to the once a month strong style traditional schedule. If you figure ranking purely on attendance and tickets sold, AJW and FMW have a huge advantage. If you look at the ten largest shows staged by each of the four groups a telling statistic emerges. All four averaged between 6,000 and 6,8000 for those major shows. And FMW's figure is significantly skewed by its 33,231 who attended the Kawasaki show on May 5. In other words, it is pretty much a dead heat based on their larger show attendance figures.

AJW then has an additional 200,000 to 300,000 tickets sold on road shows that usually attract crowds of 1,000-1,500. FMW probably sold in excess of 100,000 tickets over their ten biggest shows. RINGS and Pancrase have no such shows to bring in additional revenue. So the choice is then between AJW and FMW with the women's group getting the nod due to a much higher quality of wrestling and a prime national network TV slot.

#3—ALL JAPAN WOMEN

Position in 1995: #3

Years in Business: 28

Much has already written concerning this group's current efforts at rebuilding around younger talent. Comparing a major show line-up from two years ago to one in 1996 reveals two patterns. First, over half of the former headliners are no longer with the promotion. These are the stars who took them to their glory years and multi-million dollar profits from the early to mid-1990s. Second, wrestlers who just a short time ago were no-name green women are now working in the second tier of matches just under main events filling out much of the usual card. But despite making this sometimes painful transition, they have kept much of their fan base and toward the end of the year showed signs that it was beginning to work. They can no longer compete on the same level with the Big Two, but are still better than everything else below them.

Strengths: AJW has some of the best wrestlers found anywhere with Manami Toyota, Mima Shimoda, Kyoko Inoue, Toshiyo Yamada, and Yumiko Hotta. Toyota may be the best ever in women's wrestling... AJW is an extremely well-run operation calling on three decades of history. Their front office is a model of efficiency and their unbroken line of ownership provides them with anchored stability... They have a long history of being able to rebuild from periodic high points to lows and back again. They are in this game for the long haul and know just what to do to be successful... Their monthly TV show on the mammoth FUJI network keeps them in front of a large potential audience and helps mark them as one of the premier groups in the land... They have extensive contacts with other promotions—both

male and female—which are utilized to fill out major cards, thus deepening the talent on the talent roster...

Weaknesses: Among the talent they have lost in the last 18 months have been former AJW World Champions Bull Nakano, Lioness Aska, Chigusa Nagayo, and Jaguar Yokota. They have also lost the services of Sakie Hasegawa, Akira Hokuto, and Bison Kimura. Many of their top stars—Toyota, Aja Kong, Kyoko Inoue, Takako Inoue, Yumiko Hotta, and Toshiyo Yamada are all at or fast approaching the age of usual retirement... Some of the younger AJW workers are capable of becoming acceptable mid-card performers, but there is no one in sight with main event potential. This is especially true of the larger-sized athletes who need to become the next Dump Matsumoto or Nakano or Kong... While AJW experienced their downward slide, the other female wrestling promotions are improving, especially in the all-important area of developing younger talent. The distance between AJW and JWP is becoming smaller by the day. In November 1994 the gap was wide...

1996 Highpoints: 1/22 at Tokyo Ward Gym (4,500*), The Inoues beat Hokuto & Shimoda two falls to one, Toyota beat Hotta to retain the WWWA Title, Hasegawa pinned Bull Nakano... 3/31 in Yokohama (12,500), Six hour show takes in over \$1 million gate as Toyota pinned Kyoko Inoue, Takako Inoue beat Shimoda, and Hasegawa retired... 5/1 and 5/3 at Korakuen Hall (1,100), signs of trouble emerge as the once automatic sellout venue is barely half filled... 5/11 in Yokohama Gym (5,100*), Annual Wrestlemarinpiad featured a 52 minute match for the World Tag Titles as The Inoues beat Toyota & Shimoda... 5/18 in Tokyo (4,800*), The Dream and Future Junior All Stars show sells out with 13 interpromotional bouts staged under the AJW banner... 6/9 at Korakuen Hall (1,950*), they returned to sellout mode as Kong & Tamada & K. Inoue beat Toyota & Asari & Yoshida... 6/22 in Sapporo (4,500), Toyota & Shimoda finally took the tag straps from the Inoues, plus Reggie Bennett won a tournament for the All Pacific Title... 8/12 and 8/13 in Tokyo at Budokan Hall (10,500 combined), the two tournaments failed to sell even 40 percent of the available tickets. Yumiko Hotta fell short in a strong-style tourney in losing to Rosina Elina in the finals, while in the Discover New Heroine tournament, a star was born, but it was JWP's Tomoko Kuziumi, not an AJW wrestler... 8/30 in Osaka (5,300), Aja Kong beat Kyoko Inoue to win the annual Grand Prix tournament... 9/28 in Hakata (3,150), Toyota & Shimoda beat Itoh & Yoshida in one of the year's best tag matches... 10/6 in Nagoya (6,100), Toyota beat Kong to retain the WWWA Title, Kyoko Inoue beat Hotta to earn a future title shot... 11/21 in Kobe (2,650), Takako Inoue beat Reggie Bennett to win the All Pacific Title and Rie Tamada beat Kumiko Maekawa to win the All Japan Title... 12/1 at Korakuen Hall (2,100*), Toyota & Tamada beat Watanabe & Maekawa to win the annual tag tournament... 12/8 at Sumo Hall (10,500*), Kyoko Inoue beat Manami Toyota to win the WWWA World Title for the first time and won the promotion's match of the year designation...

#4—RINGS

Position in 1995: #7

Years in Business: 5

The promotion built by and around Akira Maeda experienced its most significant period of progress

during another one of Maeda's annual absences due to injury. Between the summer and fall the promotion gradually shifted their style from obviously worked matches toward a more realistic product that sometimes involved shooting. One reason for this was the excellence of two of the younger wrestlers, Yoshihisa Yamamoto and Kiyoshi Tamura. Not only did crowds pick up but the quality of the cards improved dramatically.

When I visited Japan in November 1994, the RINGS card I saw was the least interesting of my trip. The matches were obviously worked and some of them were not worked well. The promotion seemed to be big on loud blaring music and flashy entrances while having little in the way of wrestling substance. They paled in comparison to Pancrase and the UWFI. Tapes of their cards from the last six months show a quite different and better RINGS.

The one problem is the same one that has plagued them for the last three years. RINGS is Maeda's baby and as long as he is alive it appears he will be forever on top no matter how talented the younger wrestlers are. It is ironic that the very thing he accused Inoki of doing during his years with New Japan is now being practiced by Maeda himself.

Strengths: The new style worked by most of the undercard wrestlers is far more realistic and exciting than the RINGS bouts in the past. The change has solidified their hardcore base and has even begun to produce signs of expansion... Their average crowd for 1996 was over 6,000, a good increase from the previous two years. RINGS is one of the few promotions in Japan which is adding customers and adding to overall revenue... Yamamoto and Tamura are poised to lead the promotion into the next century. If both can stay healthy and relatively injury free, they should both be major stars very soon...

Weaknesses: The return of founder Akira Maeda not only revealed a fat and aging figure badly out of fighting shape, but a man whose style was badly out of sync with his younger athletes. Maeda has craftily postponed making the inevitable over of his own downgrading for the past three years. But now it is getting ridiculous... If Maeda insists on staying on top, most of the progress made during his extended absence will quickly evaporate. Maeda is going to have to decide if he wants to have a profitable company that brings him revenue during his middle years or if he will keep himself the focus of the promotion at the expense of profitability...

1996 Highpoints: 1/24 at Tokyo Budokan (12,683), Maeda triumphs in the Battle Dimension tournament over Yamamoto... 5/25 in Russia (6,570), Nikolai Zovov beat Willie Williams and Yamamoto triumphed over Ramaji... 6/29 at Tokyo Bay (6,700*), Maurice Smith fought Yamamoto to a 30 minute draw... 8/24 at Ariake Coliseum in Tokyo (9,000), Ricardo Morais KO'd Yamamoto just 46 seconds into their match... 10/25 in Nagoya (4,995), a fat Maeda returned and defeated Andrei Kopilov... 11/22 at Osaka Caste (7,880), Maeda beat strong-style legend Yoshiaki Fujiwara... 12/21 in Fukuoka (5,680), Tamura beat fellow wunderkind Yamamoto and Volk Han beat Bitszade Tariel in the semi-finals of the Battle Dimension tourney...

#5—FMW

Position in 1995—8
Years in Business—7

This was the first full year that FMW operated without its founder Atsushi Onita. Well, he almost stayed out a year. The man with the year-long

retirement tour could only stay on the shelf for about 18 months before returning in an eight-man tag Dec. 11.

When Onita left in May 1995, the promotion slid quickly into near oblivion. Crowds took a nosedive, revenue hit rock bottom, and the group was without direction or leadership. Many of the problems proved only transitional as the promotion seemed to once again find its way for most of 1996. Crowds were up, revenues were up, and the days of crowds in the low hundreds seemed behind them.

In the old Hollywood western movies, the cavalry often made a dramatic rescue when the wagontrain was surrounded and its defenders were valiantly dropping like flies under a vicious onslaught. Onita made sure the wagontrain was on its way to a successful defense before mounting his horse and "saving the day."

Strengths: FMW has successfully weathered a tough period during the retirement of star and founder Onita. During that time several other violence-based promotions have challenged FMW and fallen far short... With the December retirement of Mr. Pogo and the return of Onita on big shows, FMW is poised to present shows of higher quality and wider audience appeal. Before Onita retired in 1995, he became one of the hottest gate attractions in Japanese wrestling. Properly and sparingly used in 1997, Onita still has the potential to sell lots of high-priced tickets for the big spectacles... Despite having no Onita, they ran up some impressive gates in 1996. Mar. 5 in Sapporo drew 5,500 which is larger than most All Japan shows there. Their annual Kawasaki Stadium spectacular drew an impressive 33,231 in May. They drew a quarter of a million dollar gate at the Shiodome at August. September shows in Nagoya and Sapporo drew a total of over 9,000 fans...

Weaknesses: When Onita left, the group was restructured around Hayabusa and that proved to be a failure. Hayabusa still has star potential but he was badly overexposed during his run at the top and proved to be no new Onita. No key figure has emerged to replace Onita in the mind of the public. Onita's return to partial action acknowledges that problem... The women's division of FMW was weakened and nearly decimated by the retirement of Combat Toyota and the upcoming retirement of Megumi Kudo. Their two remaining female stars, Crusher Maedomari and Shark Tsuchiya, are only marginal performers with limited appeal... FMW thrives on the big gimmick matches like the double hell death matches that made Onita famous. Now rival groups are coming up with even wilder gimmicks used on even small spot shows. It is going to be difficult for FMW to keep pushing the envelope, capturing the public's imagination with something new...

1996 Highpoints: 3/15 in Sapporo (5,500), Onita began to test the waters doing a run-in during the tag team main event... 4/29 in Osaka (3,525), Terry Funk returned to FMW and beat Hisakatsu Oya... 5/5 at Kawasaki Baseball Stadium (33,231), they drew their largest crowd of the year for their first major spectacular without Onita, headlined with two pyrotechnical explosion matches... 9/1 in Nagoya (4,510), a surprisingly large crowd turned out for a six man no rope explosive barbed wire double hell dynamite match. Tanaka & Nakagawa & Kuroda were the winners... 9/29 in Sapporo (4,850), Oya beat Hayabusa... 14/26 at Korakuen

TOP 25 FEMALE WRESTLERS

1. Manami Toyota (AJW/1 in '95)
2. Mimi Shimoda (AJW/4)
3. Hikari Fukuoka (JWP/8)
4. Aja Kong (AJW/5)
5. Kauro Itoh (AJW/22)
6. Kyoko Inoue (AJW/2)
7. Tomoko Watanabe (AJW/17)
8. Jaguar Yokota (JD/NR)
9. Chaparita Asari (AJW/25)
10. Etsuko Mita (AJW/10)
11. Yumiko Hotta (AJW/11)
12. Toshiya Yamada (AJW/9)
13. Candy Okutsu (JWP/16)
14. Takako Inoue (AJW/14)
15. Hiroui Yagi (JWP/24)
16. Kauro (GAEA/NR)
17. Dynamite Kansai (JWP/12)
18. Mariko Yoshida (AJW/13)
19. Reggie Bennett (AJW/NR)
20. Mayumi Ozaki (JWP/15)
21. Lioness Aska (JD/NR)
22. Rie Tamada (AJW/NR)
23. Michiko Nagashima (LLPW/NR)
24. Fusayo Nouchi (JWP/NR)
25. Devil Masami (JWP/21)

Collective Rankings by Promotion

- (1) AJW—14 wrestlers, 224 pts.
(1995—7 wrestlers, 255 pts.)
- (2) JWP—7 wrestlers, 65 pts.
(1995—6 wrestlers, 60 pts.)
- (3) JD—2 wrestlers, 23 pts.
- (4) GAEA—1 wrestler, 10 pts.
- (5) LLPW—1 wrestler, 3 pts.
(1995—1 wrestler, 7 pts.)

Hall (2,1000), Onita saved Mr. Pogo and begged his audience to allow his return but was greeted with a chorus of negative catcalls and boos from fans who wanted Onita to stick his promise and honorably stay retired... 12/11 in Tokyo at Komazawa Park (7,923), a sellout and the second largest FMW crowd of the year saw their founder return to the ring. Onita wrestled in a frenetic eight-man tag match. His team won. Also, Mr. Pogo retired due to injuries suffered earlier in August...

#6—PANCRASE

Position in 1995: 5

Years in Business: 3 1/2

Of all the strong-style groups in Japan over the last ten years, the one that has the strongest identity is Pancrase. Unlike the original UWFI, or Maeda's RINGS, or Takada's UWFI, Pancrase has always had an unshakable sense of what they are and what they have to do to succeed. They made no concessions to the show business considerations of pro wrestling and have fostered a fighting spirit among the wrestlers that has endeared the public.

LARGEST CROWDS OF 1996

- 1) 65,000*, New Japan, Tokyo Dome, 4/29
- 2) 64,000*, New Japan, Tokyo Dome, 1/4
- 3) 37,000 est., UWFI, Jingu Stadium, 9/11
- 4) 33,321, FMW, Kaasaki Stadium, 5/5
- 5) 17,000*, New Japan, Yokohama Arena, 9/23
- 6) 16,500*, New Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 3/1
- 7) 16,300*, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 3/2
- 8) 16,300*, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 4/20
- 9) 16,300*, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 6/7
- 10) 16,300*, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 12/6
- 11) 16,000, Rikidozan, Yokohama, 6/30
- 12) 15,500, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 7/24
- 13) 15,300, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 5/27
- 14) 14,500, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 9/5
- 15) 14,000, All Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 10/18
- 16) 13,500, New Japan, Tokyo Budokan, 6/17
- 17) 12,800, Pancrase, Tokyo Budokan, 5/16
- 18) 12,683, RINGS, Tokyo Budokan, 1/24
- 19) 12,500, AJW, Yokohama, 3/31
- 20) 11,500*, New Japan, Tokyo Sumo Hall, 2/25
- 20) 11,500*, New Japan, Tokyo Sumo Hall, 8/6
- 22) 11,000, Seven shows at Tokyo Sumo Hall, five by New Japan, one each by WAR and Pancrase.

They surprised many in 1996 by becoming the first Japanese promotion to have regular pay-per-views on U.S. television. The quarterly events started to mixed reviews but by year's end they were presenting their strongest shows and best matches. Unfortunately, many viewers who purchased on the recommendation of the UFC cross-promotion decided, based on the first two events, that Pancrase had little of the action they craved and the buyrates went down. It will be interesting to see if the Pancrase pay-per-view experiment helps or hurts future efforts to place Japanese wrestling before the American public.

Pancrase continued along in 1996 much like they did in 1995. They followed the same schedule, pretty much worked the same style, and featured most of the same wrestlers and fighters. If they do not make the same financial errors that have plagued other strong style groups, they should be in the game as long as the health of their athletes holds up.

Strengths: Pancrase has a solid base of highly skilled fighters who can compete for dominance and titles without trotting out the same old thing every few months. This permits them to put new matches before the public and keeps interest high. A lack of rigid hierarchy also aids younger wrestlers in moving much faster into contention for top bouts... Their scheduling has been skillfully balanced staging monthly shows at a mixture of small, medium, and occasionally large arenas. Their stars, unlike many in other promotions, are thus not overexposed to the ticket buyers... Of all the strong style groups they are the most over with the public...

Weaknesses: Their strongest fighter over the last 18 months, Bas Rutten, has had some difficulties with the promotion and as of the end of the year his status with the group was unclear. If they were to lose Rutten, it would hurt the group in the short and long run... The wrestling style is taking a toll on many of the fighters. Even with the monthly breaks between matches, many fighters are taking serious beatings and suffering injuries. When Pancrase was first formed, its number two star was Minoru Suzuki. Over the years he has taken so much punishment that he is no longer the same fighter he once was... The departure of Ken Shamrock left the group with a gaping hole. Because of Shamrock's UFC record, he was a true star in the world of shoot fighting and added greatly to the sheen of legitimacy that Pancrase needs to separate itself from the other strong style groups...

1996 Highpoints: 1/28 in Yokohama (5,000*), Frank Shamrock beat Minoru Suzuki to win the King of Pancrase title... 3/2 in Kobe (3,500*), Rutten beat Guy Mezger and Frank Shamrock beat Yanagisawa... 4/7 in Tokyo at Korakuen Hall (4,400*, two shows), Mezger beat Yanagisawa to win a tournament to determine rankings nos. 6-9... 5/16 at Budokan Hall (12,800), Rutten beat Frank Shamrock to win the King of Pancrase Title... 6/25 in Fukuoka (7,500*), Masa Funaki beat Vernon White, Bas Rutten beat Jason DeLucia... 9/7 at Tokyo Bay-NK Hall (72,50*), Rutten beat Funaki and Kondo beat Frank Shamrock in one of their best shows ever... 12/15 at Budokan Hall (11,000), Funaki beat DeLucia in the finals of a fairly weak tournament to claim the vacant championship...

#7—MICHINOKU PRO

Position in 1995: 6

Years in Business: 5

Michinoku has been a success story modelled after after "The Little Engine that Could." They are the perfect example of a niche promotion which has survived and prospered because they do two things well. First, they have a product and style which is unique in Japan. Their mixture of New Japan junior wrestling and Mexican lucha spots means they are virtually without competitors. Second, they have always stayed in smaller arenas mainly in the northern part of Japan where few

other promotions run and even small crowds can cover minimal expenses. Over the past year, Michinoku has ventured southward and begun promoting in larger halls and have had some success doing so. As long they remember what got them to where they are, they should provide some of the most exciting wrestling in Japan for many years to come.

Strengths: The Great Sasuke is one of the ten best wrestlers in Japan. He is the group's founder and cornerstone. He is without a doubt their MVP. His popularity creates a demand for his services on other promotion's big shows and he is more than eager to comply. This only creates more publicity for Sasuke and his promotion... Michinoku is talent rich, especially with younger workers. Among their best are Super Delfin, Taka Michinoku, Gran Naniwa, and a new incarnation of Tiger Mask... The overall workrate on a Michinoku event was second to no other men's group and almost always insured the fans at least two very good matches. Michinoku's audiences almost always leave the arena entertained and happy...

Weaknesses: Despite a few successful shows in major halls and some crowd growth toward the end of the year, Michinoku is still promoting a majority of their shows in small venues often drawing only 300-400... Their lack of a full time professional front office does keep expenses down, but it also has the huge downside of forcing the wrestling talent to do double or triple duty performing a variety of tasks ranging from driving trucks, selling and advertising the shows, setting up the ring, and even occasionally selling tickets... When they do promote a bigger show, by necessity they need workers from other promotions to fill out the card. This often leaves reduced paychecks for Michinoku regulars...

1996 Highpoints: 1/10 in Sapporo (5,070), Sasuke & George Takano (Zebra) beat Mr. Pogo & Naniwa... 3/16 in Tokyo (4,800*), Sayama & Dynamite Kid made non-wrestling appearances and Super Delfin beat Pantera for the title... 8/5 in Tokyo, the Great Sasuke won all eight junior titles in New Japan's prestigious G-1 Climax tournament and fractured his skull endangering his career and health... 10/10 in Tokyo at Sumo Hall (7,980), the return of Dynamite Kid almost proved to be a disaster producing a terrible six-man tag match, but the show was saved by a five star, ten-man bout with Michinoku regulars... 11/12 in Gunma (3,500), a special card was held in honor of Gran Hamada's 25th Anniversary as a pro, Tiger Mask beat Funaki & Michinoku... 12/19 in Tokushima and 12/20 in Nagoya (3,474), the impressive attendance showed that the group was on the rise. Shinzaki beat Taka Michinoku the first night and the next night Michinoku beat Delfin...

#8—WAR

Position in 1995: 9

Years in Business: 6

When WAR first started as SWS back at the beginning of the decade, their goal was to rival New Japan and All Japan for wrestling dominance in Japan. I guess many rookie hitters in the Majors want to also eclipse Henry Aaron as the greatest home run hitter of all time. Obviously WAR has fallen short of that goal and has been lucky to hang on from one year to the next. Unlike the

other men's groups in positions four through ten, they are not and have never been a niche group. They have always wanted to be big time and have always failed.

Last year I called WAR the Timex watch version of Japanese wrestling. They continued to defy the experts and came back ticking, ready to take another licking. This year a food metaphor applies. There is probably a restaurant you know of that serves mediocre to bad food, has mediocre to poor service, and really does nothing to improve either. They do not do good business, but they do not have an empty parking lot either. Every once in a while you give the place a try and sure enough, it's the same old same old. How they stay in business is a mystery.

By the way, Genichiro Tenryu is still the chef.

Strengths: Tenryu has been the group's cornerstone for six years and is still that today. He still has name value to sell tickets against other big names and every once in a while is still capable of a decent match... Although the group has no other first-level superstars, they do have a full compliment of professionals who can fill out a card... On larger cards they can rely on the cooperation of other promotions and also foreign talent. On several cards this year the best matches they staged were Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis. And for some reason that has not been fully explained, New Japan booker Riki Choshu has a soft spot for WAR and periodically sends some of his biggest names to work WAR shows... The mid-year feud with the UWFI gave new life to the group and while it was nowhere near the level of the New Japan-UWFI business, it did sell more tickets than usual for them...

Weaknesses: If anything should happen to Tenryu tomorrow, who knows where they would stand?... Their more successful cards are only achieved by booking outside talent which can be expensive and demanding... Toward the end of the year WAR lost three mid-card wrestlers in Fuyuki, Jado, and Gedo leaving them even more bare than usual... They have no regular TV and infrequent commercial tapes...

1996 Highpoints: 4/19 in Sapporo (5,100), Tenryu beat Mr. Pogo who stormed out of the building after the match... 6/7 in Sapporo (4,000), Gedo & Jado & Fuyuki beat the UWFI Golden Cups to win the six-man titles... 7/20 and 7/21 at Sumo Hall (18,500 total), Tenryu beat Yoji Anjoh, the UWFI trio of Takada & Sano & Kakiyama take the six-man belts in a tournament, and Rey Jr. beat Juventud Guerrera while 84 percent of available tickets were sold... 10/11 in Osaka (6,510), Tenryu beat Great Muta and Ultimo Dragon beat Great Sasuke to win the eight unified junior titles... 12/13 at Sumo Hall (8,500), Tenryu beat Nobuhiko Takada and Dragon retained his eight titles over Rey Misterio Jr....

#9—JWP

Position in 1995: 10

Years in Business: 10

Sometimes progress is measured in inches or feet rather than miles. In 1996, JWP closed the distance between themselves and the much larger All Japan Women's group, JWP became a bit better while their bigger rivals became a little worse. Lest nobody out there be fooled, there are still light years between what the two groups can do both in

business and in wrestling. But progress is indeed progress and they'll take it where they can get it.

Strengths: While the world drooled over AJW's success in past years, AJW quietly found some young, fresh wrestlers and now seem poised to really do something with them. Among these younger workers are Hiroumi Yagi, Candy Okusu, Tomoko Kuzumi, and Tomoko Miyagushi... Top level wrestler Hikari Fukuoka is one of Japan's five best female workers and seemed poised to make a solid run becoming a Toyota-like champion for the next three years. A long-term feud pitting Dynamite Kansai against Fukuoka could do solid box office if properly set up and maintained... In addition to the younger workers and Fukuoka, they have a solid group of veterans to anchor the promotion through the transition period. Among these are Kansai, Devil Masami, Cutie Suzuki, and Mayumi Ozaki...

Weaknesses: The group has experienced tough economic times in the past and still is not on tremendously solid ground. A tough period of four to six lean months could spell disaster for them much like it did during early 1992 forcing them to close up for four months... It is difficult to establish themselves as an independent entity when they have to exist in the large shadow of AJW. They still rely on AJW for exposure on their cards and until they produce their own Aja Kong or Toyota they will forever be thought of as the little sister...

1996 Highpoints: 4/7 in Yokohama: Takako Inoue & Kansai beat Kyoko Inoue & Mayumi Ozaki... 5/14 in Tokyo at Korakuen Hall (1,600), a 35 minute street fight saw Ozaki beat Takako Inoue... 6/16 at Korakuen Hall (4,400* for two shows) combined forces with GAEA and some AJW wrestlers for two sellouts... 10/13 at Sumo Hall (6,000), K. Inoue & Masami upset the dream team of Kong & Kansai and an eight-person match with four men from Michinoku and the four women stole the show... 11/26 at Tokyo Gym (3,128), Masami & Fukuoka beat Kansai & Suzuki to win the tag belts...

#10—UWFI

Position in 1995: Not ranked due to dominance by New Japan in feud

Years in Business: 5 1/2

The only real story for the UWFI in 1996 has yet to be written or even investigated. What happened to them seemed to defy reality. In 1995 they were basically operated by New Japan and drew history-making box office receipts. When 1996 began, the feud was still red hot. Jan. 4 at the Tokyo Dome, Nobuhiko Takada took the IWGP World Title from Keiji Muto before 64,000 fans. Six months later the feud was over and the UWFI was scrambling to find others to feud with. They ended up working "against" the lackluster WAR. By the end of December, they were out of business.

The comet-crashing-like demise left many unanswered questions, most of them centered around finances. What was the group's share of the revenue for the three record-setting Tokyo Dome shows in late 1995 and early 1996? What did they do with that money? How could a group that drew over 30,000 to Jingu Stadium in September be defunct just three months later?

For the UWFI there are no strengths or weaknesses. There is no more UWFI. There need to be answers to the above questions. There is a lesson to be learned here and it should be learned before its consequences are repeated.

JAPANESE WRESTLING DIRECTORY

All Japan Pro Wrestling
7-312 Roppongi
Minato-ku, Tokyo 106... (03) 3403-7344

All Japan Women
2-17-17 Shimomeguro
Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153

Battlarts
Tsukiji-Mitsui Building 74
4-7-1 Tsukiji
Chuo-ku, Tokyo 104... (03) 3546-8525

Dai Hihom Pro Wrestling
Ikebecho 4347
Tsuzuki-ku, Yokohama
Kanagawa 224... (045) 937-0811

FMW
Akiyoshi Building 3F
Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo 101... (03) 5496-0678

GAEA Japan
Covamoc Building 2B
Taishido 5-15-3
Setegaya-ku, Tokyo 154

JWP Women's Pro Wrestling
Daishu Building #504
Ueno 1-15-10
Taitu-ku, Tokyo 110

LLPW
BixelBunkyo #105
Suido 2-13-4
Bunkoku, Tokyo 112

Michinoku Pro Wrestling
9-8 Zaimokuchi
Morioka-shi
Iwate-ken 020... (0196) 26-1333

New Japan Pro Wrestling
6-4-10 Roppongi
Minato-ku, Tokyo 106

Nishi Nihonn Pro Wrestling
1-1-33 Kusu
Kimamoto-shi
Kumamoto-ken 862... (096) 339-8338

Pancrase
Yoga Chuo Building 301
4-14-22 Yoga
Setagaya-ku, Tokyo 158... (03) 3707-646

RINGS
Satoh Building 2F Room 2025
13-1 Nanpeidai, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150
(03) 3461-0257

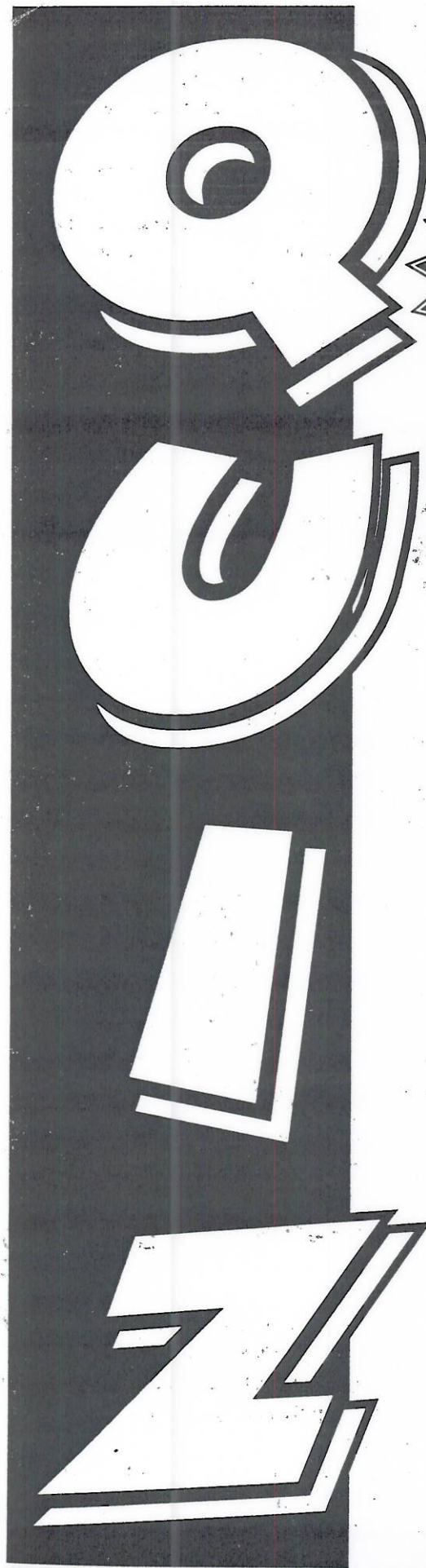
Samurai Project
Benos Kyodo Building 205
Miyasaka 3-12-18
Setagaya-ku, Tokyo 156... (03) 3461-3618

SGP
1-6 Nakayama-cho
Mizuhoko, Nagoya-shi
Aichi-ken 167... (052) 883-3908

Tokyo Pro Wrestling (FFF)
Miyazawa Building 3F
2-19-2 Minami Aoyama
Minato-ku, Tokyo 107... (03) 5411-0808

UWFI Intwrmation
4-21-1 Tsurumaki
Setegaya-ku, Tokyo 154... (03) 3439-1121

Wrestle Yume Factory
Hirose 269-1
Kumagayashi, Saitama 360
(0485) 22-5498



BRUCE MITCHELL'S

RIBBED &
LUBRICATED

SIXTH ANNUAL

YEAR-IN-REVIEW

Herbie, we hardly knew ye.

A Year in Review Quiz era passed on during the year 1996. The patron saint of a beloved pro wrestling tradition died.

Herb Abrams, the loudmouth Universal Wrestling Federation promoter, drug user, and all-around criminal died last year, leaving a quiz standard for bizarre behavior that may never be equalled.

This guy was hardly your typical fly-by-night, stiff-the-rubes-and-the-boys, con man promoter either. Herb Abrams made Don King look honest and Fritz Von Erich look subdued.

More than any one person, Herb Abrams embodies the spirit of the Torch Quiz, that shameless mix of sleaze and ineptitude that feuls an entire sports entertainment industry. Herb's promoting modus operandi was immortalized in three separate years of the quiz and went something like this:

Herb-unshaven, beet red, with spittle flying—would rant that wrestling was just a circus and he was bringing the stars of the Universal Wrestling Federation (Danny Spivey, Cactus Jack, and always “Dr. Death” Steve Williams) to Fla./S.C./Vegas because he was, of course, Major League. Herb then

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN HITCHCOCK

ran up a bunch of bills in the local area, put his show on in front of dozens of paying fans (said show was always more noticeable for the action backstage than any in the ring), and then skipped town in a stretch limousine one step ahead of the creditors and the law.

Incredibly, he pulled this scam three years in a row, the last time in, of all places, Las Vegas, a town that first became famous when its founder, Bugsy Siegal, was shot in the head six times when he tried to skip out on some bills.

But even this, coupled with dying, wasn't enough to make Herb Abrams the patron saint of the Torch Quiz. It was the little things that made all the difference—like the time Herb got mad about something written about him and called the guy in a rage to let him know about it. Whoops! Turns out the writer was only 15 years old. No matter, the kid might have an allowance, so Herb threatened a lawsuit.

Or the time Herb started a pro wrestling tradition on his very first televised UWF match when he has his lead good guy, "Dr. Death," stuff a "sheet" down the mouth of one wrestling jobber "Dave Meltzer," predating the whining of such industry leaders of Hulk Hogan, Dok Hendrix, and Vic Venom by several years.

Or the mystery of how Herb got Dr. Death booked on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno when neither Vince nor Ted could get Hulk on in a decade's worth of trying...

Of course, a guy like Herb Abrams can hardly be said to have "passed away." He may have saved the best act for last. This year Herb was found nude, ranting and mumbling up and down the hall of a New York City office complex at 6 a.m. one Tuesday. The exertion of all this was subsequently too much for him and his heart gave out. He left behind a trail of warrants and arrests unmatched in this business for their shameless indecency. A wrestling promoter to the end, Herb was said to be putting together a European tour even as he took his clothes off—for the last time.

So as you read the latest quiz and ponder all of its Johnny Come Latelays, save a thought for the guy who set the standard.

And gave the FanBoy Oddity Mike Lano something to shoot for...

There are no prizes for correct answers this year because too many of you irritated me during the Erich Kulas controversy. We still have

provided the answer to you lazy clowns, but you're only allowed to look if you promise to stop speculating about unlikely hotline conspiracy theories. Please read the questions silently to yourself as I read them aloud. Vince, you're answers may still be wrong even if Bruce and Pat tell you they're right.



(1) "What's the deal with Sting?" became the cry of fans everywhere as Steve Borden revised his career in 1996. How did WCW's highest paid babyface accomplish this remarkable transformation?

- A. By never talking
- B. By never wrestling
- C. By never changing expressions
- D. By never moving.
- E. All of the above

(2) Brian Pillman, one of the U.S.'s best in-ring workers, also became one of the year's most talked about figures and got himself a high dollar contract in the bargain. What traditional wrestling tactics did Pillman use to accomplish this?

- A. Lying to his employers at WCW
- B. Lying to his employers at ECW
- C. Never entering the ring to wrestle
- D. Signing a contract to wrestle with the WWF despite not knowing if he would wrestle again
- E. All of the above

(3) Shawn Michaels reached his life-long dream of becoming the WWF Champion and the top man in Titan Sports in 1996. He became their best drawing headliner in years. Titan Sports

rewarded this remarkable accomplishment by:

- A. Holding a special ceremony in Madison Square Garden to honor him.
- B. Bringing back Pam Anderson to be his valet at pay-per-view shows.
- C. Paying him a big bonus at the end of the fiscal year.
- D. Letting his real life arch rival Bret Hart trash him constantly on TV and then stripping him of the title completely.

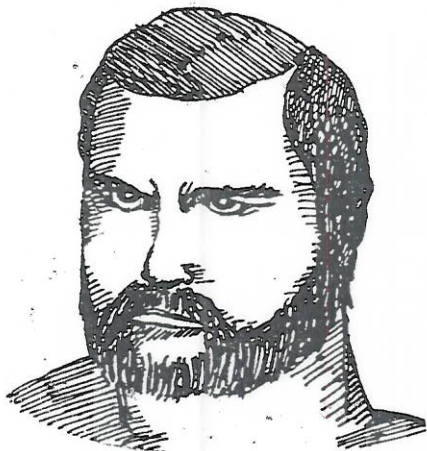
(4) Ohh, Gross! Dept. ECW's Tommy Dreamer "the innovator of hardcore" would do anything for the cause of hardcore wrestling and its hardcore fans. What is the one thing Tommy Dreamer finds too hardcore to do for all of his hardcore supporters?

- A. Getting cuckolded and humiliated by two lesbians, but sleeping with them anyway because that's what the hardcore fans would want.
- B. Letting himself get smashed in the head by a cornucopia of foreign objects.
- C. Getting thrown backward off the stage through several tables.
- D. Getting thrown backward off a ring truck through several tables.
- E. Taking his shirt off.



(5) At WCW Uncensored the highlight of the show came when the heroic MegaPowers, Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage, crawled over the mat to rip up glassine bags of white powder. They did this:

- A. To throw the white powder in the eyes of their opponents.
- B. Out of habit.



(6) Chris Benoit became a major player in WCW this year by expanding his repertoire beyond just being one of the world's best technical wrestlers. What was the hardest thing Benoit had to learn to do?

A. Show emotional fire with his facial expressions.

B. Let Kevin Sullivan throw him down concrete steps.

C. Let his head get slammed with bathroom doors.

D. Let the matronly Woman grope him in bars and pretend that he liked it.

(7) Olympic competitor Mark Henry was so popular among his peers in the WWF dressing room that:

A. Several WWF wrestlers made a trip to the Atlanta Olympics to cheer him on.

B. WWF Superstars generously gave Henry tips to help him become a better wrestler.

C. They made him a part of his ongoing card games in the dressing room.

D. Someone slipped a turd in his sandwich.

(8) Downloaded superstar Sunny was so popular among her peers and the WWF dressing room that:

A. Sable and Marlena threw her a surprise bridal shower at Wrestlemania.

B. Several WWFers made a trip to New York to watch her tape MTV's Singled Out.

C. They made her a part of their ongoing card games in the dressing room.

D. Someone slipped a turd in her salad.

(9) You Know You Want To Know Dept.: Which one of the aforementioned WWF superstars actually got to taste their food?

A. Sunny.

B. Mark Henry.

(10) NWA president Dennis Coraluzzo upheld the proud tradition of the world's oldest professional wrestling sanctioning body when he:

A. Booked a Dan Severn vs. Shinya Hashimoto title unification match for the Tokyo Dome.

B. Booked the Final Showdown: Dory Funk Jr. vs. Jack Brisco for the Tampa Sundome.

C. Booked the Iron Sheik to do the Macarena in Cherry Hill, N.J.

(11) True or False: Arn Anderson pinned Hulk Hogan on live television in 1996.

(12) True or False: Booty Man pinned Arn Anderson on live television in 1996.

(13) Vince McMahon was the talk of the wrestling business when he aggressively attacked his competition with a series of hardhitting skits ruthlessly skewering Hulk Hogan, Randy Savage, and Ted Turner. What actually was the final outcome of the feud between the Huckster and the Nacho Man?

A. The Huckster won.

B. The Nacho Man won.

C. Both old guys collapsed and died.

D. WCW used the skits as the inspiration for the NWO, the most successful wrestling angle of the decade.

(14) 1997 Quiz Sneak Preview: Titan Sports attorney Jerry McDevitt said that WCW depositionee Mark Madden, "Wrestling's Only Real Journalist," was "to journalists what Heidi Fleiss is to dating." What exactly did he mean by that?

A. You don't have to take Madden to dinner.

B. Madden works by the hour.

C. If you've got the money, honey, he's got the time.

D. His usefulness in his field is practically over.

(15) 1996 was the year Vince McMahon and Titan Sports joined WCW in declaring the drug

crisis in pro wrestling over. What was the one way that fans knew they were serious?

A. Both scaled back the drug testing of all performers.

B. The WWF put the World Title in Sycho Sid Eudy.

C. Scott Steiner returned to active competition with WCW.

D. Titan Sports signed and groomed bodybuilder Acheim Albrecht for stardom.

E. Ahmed Johnson got a big push as WWF Intercontinental Champion.

F. Hulk Hogan started bragging about the size of his gun(s) again.

G. Jeep Swenson and Tiny Lister appeared on WCW shows.

H. Brian James and Curtis Hughes returned to the WWF.



(16) How could you tell that Marc Mero took his religious beliefs seriously?

A. He refused to appear on camera with another man's wife.

B. He appeared at a lot of community events in the Atlanta area for free.

C. He left his young daughter with his parents so he could go on the road with his wife, who was dressed like a high priced call girl.

(17) What is Destructivity?

A. An attachment on a cordless vacuum cleaner.

B. One of the members of High Voltage.

C. The Ultimate Warrior's own religion, as espoused in the pages of his own comic book.

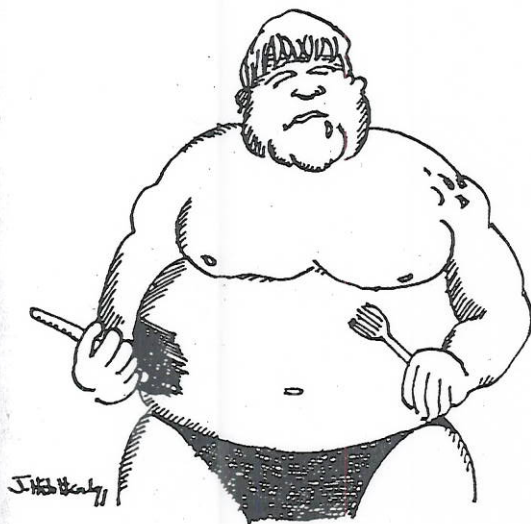
D. The Alternative Wrestling Federation's Northeast Heavyweight Champion.

(18) Public Enemy went from being the Torch's 1995 Most Valuable Tag Team to one of the worst in one year simply by:

- A. Leaving ECW.
- B. Signing with WCW.
- C. Wrestling exactly the same way as before.
- D. All of the above.

(19) Wrestling veteran Harley Race got the most national television publicity of his entire career for:

- A. A retrospective of his 30-plus years in the business on ESPN2.
- B. Making a comeback in the Big Japan Pro Wrestling promotion.
- C. Starting his own wrestling school.
- D. Repeatedly beating his wife.



(20) What is the most popular gimmick in the history of the ECW promotion?

- A. Bisexual valets.
- B. Shane Douglas as The Franchise.
- C. Team Taz.
- D. The World's Greatest Tag Team—The Eliminators.
- E. The World's Most Blatant Rip-off—The Blue World Order.

(21) Dusty Rhodes made his long-awaited return to the Mid-Atlantic in 1996, the territory he destroyed with his shoddy egomaniacal booking, at WCW's WarGames pay-per-view. The fans greeted him by:

- A. Pelting him with trash.
- B. Boing loudly.

C. Totally ignoring him.

D. Giving him a standing ovation and chanting "Dusty, Dusty."

(22) The WWF's Vic Venom "Wrestling's Only Real Journalist" shocked Live Wire viewers at the end of 1996 when he guaranteed that Bret Hart would win the Royal Rumble and go on to the main event at Wrestlemania. What was the most amazing thing about that guarantee?

A. That Venom would give away the finish on WWF television to one of the biggest shows of the year and the next six months of booking just to get himself over an "expert."

B. That instead of ignoring the unknown Venom's assertion on the low-rated Live Wire show, the WWF panicked and ruined the finish of the Royal Rumble.

C. That the WWF continued to let Venom appear on the show even after he pulled this boneheaded stunt.

(23) True or False: American Wrestling Federation Paul Alperstein had millions of dollars to buy syndication TV across the country, but no money to fix his teeth.

(24) How many times in 1996 did the Body Donnas win the WWF Tag Team Titles? The Smoking Gunns? The Godwinns? The Bruise Brothers? The Grimm Twins? Aldo Montoya & Bob Holly? Aldo Bogni & Bronco Lubich? The Cruel Connection? Regis & Kathy Lee? Who knows? Who cares?

(25) The Cauliflower Alley, the service and fellowship organization for retired wrestlers and boxers, called a three hour emergency meeting of the board of directors in order to discuss what

(26) Match the WCW announcer with his most memorable achievement in 1996.

- A. Acted drunk on the air but wasn't.
- B. Acted drunk on the air but was.
- C. Showed real emotion, for once, during Hulk Hogan's turn.
- D. Obsessively talked about "manliness."
- E. Was totally forgotten.
- F. Made himself the focus of the NWO
- G. Grinned insipidly at the camera for no reason.

- 1. Eric Bischoff
- 2. Tony Schiavone
- 3. Chris Cruise
- 4. Bobby Heenan
- 5. Dusty Rhodes
- 6. Mike Tenay
- 7. Larry Zbyszko



burning issue?

A. Establishing a pension fund for needy wrestlers.

B. Setting up a historical museum to preserve wrestling's heritage.

C. Starting a membership drive to bolster the organization's enrollment.

D. How to distance themselves from the FanBoy Oddity Mike Lano.

(27) To be fair, though, no one spends more time and energy to, in his own words, "help the wrestling business" than the FanBoy Oddity Mike Lano. One of the greatest figures in the history of the sport, perennial NWA Champion and Icon of Icons, Lou Thesz, singled Lano out when he said:

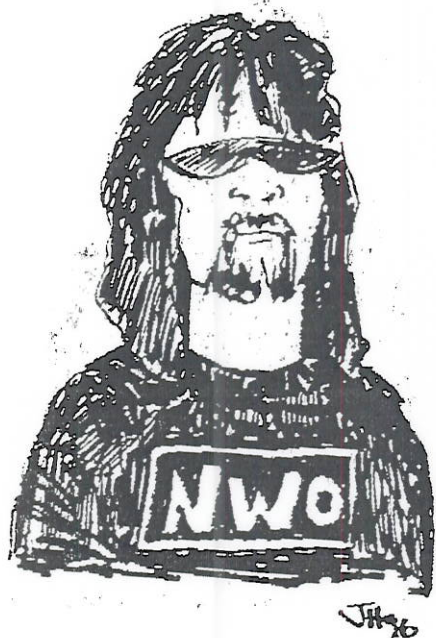
A. "Fans like you make this business a pleasure."

B. "We need more guys like you instead of that Wade Keller."

C. "Got any Vicadans?"

D. "In my career I have met thousands of liars. You're another one."

(28) Repairing Your Reputation Dept.: After Brian Nobbs, on live television, spread his ass



cheeks and said he was talking like WCW executive president Eric Bischoff, the Nasty Boys were in the WCW dog house. How did the Boys decide to get back into WCW's good graces?

- A. They pretended they were friends with Ed Leslie.
- B. They sent flowers weekly to Eric Bischoff's wife.
- C. They started eating right and working out.
- D. They deliberately injured WCW's key act, The Outsiders, during a house show.

(29) Titan Sports shocked the wrestling world on a live Friday Raw when Jim Ross announced that Diesel and Razor Ramon were returning to the WWF, despite that Scott Hall and Kevin Nash were signed to longterm deals to WCW. What explained this shocking master-stroke by Titan head Vince McMahon?

- A. McMahon knew of a loophole in the Outsiders contract that allowed him to steal them back.
- B. McMahon had made a backdoor deal with Eric Bischoff to share talent.
- C. McMahon had no idea what he'd do next
- D. and he figured his loyal fans were so stupid they'd blame Jim Ross.

(30) Harlem Heat, after years of angles and title runs, finally got heat on a par with their name during the Hog Wild pay-per-view show.

What was the key factor that so incensed the fans in Sturgis, S.D.?

- A. The Heat kicked over a motor cycle during their ring entrance.
- B. The fans resented having to watch Stevie Ray do nothing every match.
- C. The fans resented having to watch Sister Sherri in that girdle.
- D. The fans really, really liked the Steiner Brothers.
- E. The fans really, really hated African-Americans.

(31) Believe It or Not Dept.: Who threw the best superkick in 1996?

- A. WWF Champion Shawn Michaels
- B. AWF Superstar Chris Adams
- C. BWO leader Stevie Richards
- D. Bischoff's bobo Sonny Onno

(32) To be fair, Sonny Onno is more than just another of Eric Bischoff's drinking partners. He is the liaison between WCW and their partners New Japan Pro Wrestling. He is so respected by NJPW that:

- A. Onno was presented with a large floral arrangement in the ring at the April TokyoDome show.
- B. He was invited to visit Antonio Inoki's palatial estate.
- C. He was voted Foreign Executive of the Year by the editors of Gong Magazine.
- D. Kurosawa told Onno if he tried to accompany him to the ring in Japan he'd beat him up.

(33) The Eliminators, the ECW Tag Team Champions, are the greatest tag team in the world:

- A. Because of their series of matches with Bad Crew.
- B. Because of their series of matches with The Gangstas.
- C. Because of their series of matches with Sabu & Rob Van Dam.
- D. Because Joey Styles said it over and over on ECW television.

(34) The WWF made plans to run weekly pay-per-view shows on Saturday nights in order to:

- A. Torture the people who cover wrestling and make sure they have no lives.

B. Torture their own production staff, booking committee, and wrestlers.

- C. Torture their most loyal fans.
- D. All of the above.

(35) 1996 was a great year for wrestlers and wrestling in many ways. Which of the following performers may have had the best year of all?

- A. Scott Hall, who got a big money contract and almost never had to wrestle.
- B. Kevin Nash, who got a big money contract and almost never had to wrestle.
- C. Sting, who had a big money contract and never had to wrestle.
- D. Brian Pillman, who signed a big money contract yet never had to wrestle and got his medical bills paid, to boot.
- E. "Vincent" Mike Jones, who got a money contract, but never had to wrestle.
- F. Ted DiBiase, who got a big money contract and got his boss to do all his work.
- G. Everyone in the AWF besides Paul Alperstein.



(36) Jerry Lawler, the King of Memphis, went on live WMC television during USWA pro wrestling and read a negative review in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* of a recent Nitro event and told Memphis fans to stay home during the next Memphis Nitro show. Memphis fans, who had faithfully watched their hero Lawler for decades, responded to his heartfelt advice by:

A. Picketing outside the Mid-South Coliseum the night of Nitro.

B. Chanting "Lawler, Lawler" during the Hollywood Hogan interview.

C. By unfurling a huge "Memphis is King Country" banner on live TV.

D. By setting the all-time gate record for wrestling in Memphis.



(37) True or False: Missy Hyatt let Sandman lick beer off her front and claimed Sgt. Slaughter was her hero, all in the same year.

(38) Teddy Long had a bad year as a WCW manager, managing losers like Craig Pitman, Bobby Walker, and Jim Powers. How long will Teddy Long have to suffer through this?

- A. Until he gets some talent in his stable.
- B. Until he stops sabotaging his own guys.
- C. Until he reminds Kevin Sullivan about the NAACP.

(39) New Jack of the Gangstas was one of the most newsworthy wrestlers of 1996, garnering publicity for ECW on almost a weekly basis. Which of the following incidents finally got New Jack terminated from the promotion?

- A. When he no-showed some cards because he was in jail in Georgia.
- B. When he hi-jacked an ECW Arena show by doing an 18 minute self-indulgent rant in the middle of the ring.
- C. When he precipitated a brawl between

wrestlers and fans by attacking a spectator.

D. When he slashed Erich Kulas's forehead with a knife.

E. When he threatened to cut Dave Meltzer's throat for reporting about him.

F. None of them.

(40) Antonio Inoki ran his Wrestle For Peace megashow in Los Angeles bringing together promotions from around the world to put on matches on the same show. What's another slogan like Wrestle for Peace that Inoki could use on his next show?

- A. Grapple for Jobs.
- B. Work for Justice.
- C. War for Peace.
- D. Inoki is Love.

(41) Tank Abbott, the cult hero of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, proved last year he deserved his tough guy rep when he:

- A. Got whipped in one tournament by an alternate who looked like a bus driver.
- B. Got suspended for getting in a chair throwing brawl with the ref's wife.
- C. Did color commentary drunk and slurred several of the competitors.
- D. Made it to the finals of the Ultimate Ultimate.

(42) Essay Question: In a thousand words or fewer explain how Tommy Dreamer never noticed that his supposedly pregnant girlfriend didn't gain any weight and wouldn't have sex three days a month and when Shane Douglas told him why and that she was cheating on him, too, he didn't get mad.

(43) Hulk Hogan revived his career with his long-awaited heel turn last year. What was the only problem with this exciting turn of events?

- A. He still wrestled like Hulk Hogan.
- B. He still hogged the spotlight like Hulk Hogan.
- C. He still did interviews like Hulk Hogan.
- D. He still did movies like Hulk Hogan.
- E. He still was Hulk Hogan.

(44) During his hiatus Bret Hart allowed WWF cameras into his home for an inside look during a series of heartfelt interviews about his career. What was the most noticeable thing fans saw during the feature?



- A. The pictures of his son playing ice hockey.
- B. The portrait of his father Stu in the family room.

- C. The modern art collection.
- D. The countless pictures of himself on every wall.

(45) What was the most overblown, over analyzed, and overbearing topic of the 1996 in pro wrestling?

- A. The UFC controversy.
- B. Bret Hart's career moves.
- C. The NWO.
- D. The ECW pay-per-view
- E. The Monday Night Ratings.

Answer Key: 1 (e); 2 (e); 3 (d); 4 (e); 5 (a); 6 (d); 7 (d); 8 (d); 9 (b); 10 (c); 11 (true); 12 (true); 13 (d); 14 (d); 15 (a); 16 (c); 17 (c); 18 (d); 19 (d, according to his ex-wife on the Oprah Winfrey show); 20 (e); 21 (d); 22 (b); 23 (true); 24 (not me); 25 (D); 26 (d); 27 (A-5, B-4, C-2, D-7, E-3, F-1, G-6); 28 (d); 29 (c & d); 30 (e); 31 (d); 32 (d); 33 (d); 34 (d); 35 (pick 'em); 36 (d); 37 (true); 38 (C); 39 (f); 40 (c); 41 (d); 43 (e); 44 (d); 45 (e).

Bruce Mitchell has made friends and influenced people with his popular quiz for six consecutive years. He has been a Torch columnist since September 1990. He recommends "The Drinking Life" by Pete Hamill for your reading pleasure. As always, Bruce thanks John Hitchcock for his illustrations and for the annual challenge of figuring out exactly who John intended to draw.

TORCH TALK YEAR IN REVIEW SPECIAL

WITH

JERRY JARRETT

Jerry Jarrett, age 53, has worked in the wrestling industry for over 30 years. He made a natural progression from wrestler to promoter over those years. He worked for himself, partnering with Jerry Lawler in the highly successful Memphis wrestling territory for over 25 years. When business in his territory, the USWA, hit hard times, he worked for the WWF in a front office booking position. Jarrett's time in the WWF a few years ago was during Vince McMahon's steroid trial. He saw the WWF at a time of stress, when business was dropping, but also while the WWF had a solid foothold on being number one. He followed that up by becoming a consultant for Eric Bischoff and WCW. In the last year or so he has followed the business from the outside looking in. While he was an absentee owner, for all intents and purposes, in recent years until selling his share of the USWA early in 1997, he still followed the industry very closely, keeping in touch with dozens of contacts and friends, not to mention following the career of his son Jeff Jarrett.

In this Mar. 2, 1997 "Torch Talk" with Jarrett, he uses his decades of first-hand experience in so many different areas of the industry and personal knowledge working with virtually every major player in the industry to reflect on major events in 1996. He talks about Vince McMahon's relationship with his closest assistants, Pat Patterson and Bruce Prichard. He talks about front office executives in the Big Two ranging from Lisa Wolfe to Kevin Sullivan. He talks about Shawn Michaels, Bret Hart, the WWF's attempt to replace Diesel and Razor Ramon, ECW's expansion, the problems of the UFC, and much more in this special: "Torch Talk: 1996 Year in Review Special."

Wade Keller: You've worked for Vince McMahon. You've worked for Eric Bischoff. Does it surprise you that Eric Bischoff has surpassed Vince McMahon as wrestling's most influential person and has been able to lead WCW to a point where it is, at the very least, giving the WWF a run for it's money as the top promotion in the U.S.?

Jerry Jarrett: Does it surprise me? Yes it does. It is amazing to me. Eric and I had some in-depth conversations about the wrestling business. When he told me the things that he told me it was like me sitting there with the perspective of an old timer, I thought, Holy cow; this is crazy. Then I have sat and watched it unfold and it is absolutely brilliant. What he's done is he has redone and outdone exactly what Vince McMahon did in the early '80s. He has piece by piece laid this projection out there for the fans that it's cool to watch WCW. When that ball started rolling in his direction, it just took on its own synergy and the momentum has just snowballed. Some of the

things he's done have just amazed me. It's more than surprised me. It's amazed me.

Maybe at the time he didn't know it or have it all formulated, or maybe I just wasn't smart enough to catch on. I mean, long before it ever happened he talked to me about not wanting to do anything in wrestling that's predictable. He said he didn't want to do anything that had been done in the past. He got the players—got Hogan, got Savage, got Luger, kept Sting, kept Flair, then Hall and Nash came in with the Outsiders and NWO thing. To top it off you had Hogan rising to the ascendancy of (the NWO) which rekindled that charisma he has had since way back in Memphis. I was a big fan of Hogan's the first time he came to my house because he has something not many people have.

It wasn't just the NWO, either. Eric brought in the Mexicans. Being very candid, I first saw the Mexican wrestlers in WCW and thought, Now, that's not going to make a lot of damn sense. How do you have these guys flying all over the ring and doing things that border on suicide and then come out and have Hogan in the main event? But boy when you sit down and watch a Nitro and see it happen, it's just incredible. In a two hour show if there aren't a couple of segments for everybody, then you can't satisfy that person. There is something to satisfy and appease every taste there has ever been in the wrestling business. I mean, Dean Malenko will make us old timers sit up and watch. Hall and Nash are cool. Hogan has the charisma. The boys from Mexico and Japan do all of the suicide stuff. It's a hell of a mix. And, yes, I'm very surprised—amazed.

The thing that I'm not surprised at is when you get that public perception to saying that this is where it's at, that this is the hip thing, this is the happening thing, it'll go on for a good while and have a life of its own. The only way the WWF is going to be able to attack is in the same way Vince did in the early '80s. Eric just did it. You gotta do it a piece at the time. You've got to have the ball rolling. Vince, I think, has helped Eric. He went from being the kiddie family hour to having some things on that were embarrassing to me. I don't think I'm a monk or a prude, but some of the sexual stuff is offensive to me. In my circle of friends, we've got some who won't let their kids watch the WWF. They've called me and asked me what in the hell is going on with them. So, yes, I'm surprised at Bischoff. Then I analyze it and I think it is brilliant and I think it will last a long time.

Keller: Is there anything in all of your years in wrestling that compares to the NWO phenomena—one gimmick or concept that changed the face of wrestling to such a degree in such a short amount of time?

Bischoff: (Pause) Not really, not on that scale. When we had the Fabulous Ones, Steve Keirn and Stan Lane, I made a series of videos. Quite honestly, the reason I did the concept is at the time I didn't think Stan or Steve, neither one of them, could talk and make an interview. For the first six months they didn't talk, but they were big stars back in those days. They were selling 2,000 dollars worth of pictures a week and selling out every arena they went to. We did it from just saying here's two sexy, good looking guys who are as tough as hell. We put them in limousines and mink coats. For us in that era it was a drastic turn around from anything we'd done. It caught on and carried this territory during really the peak of our good years. We had a lot, and I mean a lot, of 150,000 dollar gross weeks. You string them together and you're talking about 600,000 months. I could book everything in the territory in Memphis and put the Fabs and opponents in a spot show and draw 15,000 dollars at the spot show and 20,000 in Memphis. So the answer to your question is no, but the Fabs is the only thing that comes to my mind from my experience that was totally different. Remember, Stan and Steve didn't make an interview on television for six months. And, of course, I eventually found out they both were great interviewers. They had never been in a position to make interviews. Me, in all of my great wisdom, I thought, They can't make a great interview. All of us promoters get so caught up being the maestro in front of the orchestra that we forget that they could play a whole lot better if we just gave them a start and a spot and let them stand up there and let them play. I don't think that's a big knock for all of us promoters. It's just part of the territory. We just get so caught up in painting the canvas that sometimes what we need to do is step back and let things take place naturally.

I think that Vince and Eric both, I've witnessed them both do that at times. They've taken hands off enough to let things happen. From what I see and hear, I think they'll have to continue that. They're going to have to because there isn't any farm club out there hatching wrestlers. Then again, I thought we'd run out of talent five years ago.

Keller: A big aspect of the success of the NWO in 1996 was Hulk Hogan turning heel. Did it surprise you Hogan turned heel?

Jarrett: I tell you what a lot of people sell Hogan short on—and I don't know why people sell him short on it—but he is a savvy, smart son of a gun. It really surprised me that WCW allowed it to happen. That surprised me. Here, we've all heard the story of (Harvey) Schiller with Hogan walking across the parking lot to a baseball game or some kind of game and all of the fans flocked

around Hogan. Schiller said, "I've walked across parking lots with some of the superstars of the world and I've never seen anything like this." Hogan was their marketing campaign. Whatever merchandise they sold was Hogan's. Whatever toy deals they had were Hogan's. I just didn't think the North Tower (TBS corporate offices) would ever allow it. Somebody put their testicles on the line in order to let it happen and had the confidence of what it would do because if it had flopped they would have lost a hell of a revenue stream. As it turned out, I understand NWO merchandise is outselling anything they ever did before.

When you're in war and you take a crazy chance, you either get killed or you become a hero. In business, if you take a chance you either become a hero or you get killed. Somebody took some big, bold chances and became heroes.

Keller: You've been there in the trenches, in the week to week booking conversations and ups and downs as different numbers have come in. What does it mean to Vince McMahon that Raw lost thirtysome weeks in a row in the last half of 1996?

Jarrett: Let me tell you something, Vince McMahon lives and breaths his business 24 hours a day. He goes to bed thinking about it and he gets up thinking about it. Hell, when I was up there I'd be at his house early, early in the morning. He'd come into the kitchen wringing wet with sweat because he had been working out for an hour. He would walk in and say, "You know, I was thinking about this." Sh—, I guess while he's riding the bike and lifting weights he's sitting there thinking about the business. I don't think the man ever thinks about anything other than the business.

I can tell you (1996) was devastating to him. He can't fix it because he can't comprehend what his problem is. If you don't know you have a problem internally, then you can't fix it. He's looking at all these external forces. He's says this guys a son of a bitch and this guys a son of a bitch and this guy's doing this and this guy's doing that and they've got this advantage. But Vince's whole problem is internal. If he'd just sit there at the dining room table in his house by himself I think he could compete. And the new people he's brought up there, I guarantee ya—I don't want to get into specific names—but I guarantee you that the last two or three additions are just having to tight walk to keep from getting run off, to keep from offending this little pack that is there to protect itself.

The only exposure Vince can get to any fresh thinking has to be filtered and when you filter it through the same sieve, and if there's oil in the sieve, it don't matter a damn what you've got, you're cake's got oil in it, your coffee's oil in it. Everything has oil in it. The WWF, even though it's a big corporation, is run out of Vince's dining room. All of the major decisions are made there. All of the thinking is formulated there. All you got to do is sit out by the guard house and find out who passes through there and you find out who is the power in the WWF. That is where everything happens. Everything.

Keller: Not on the fourth floor of Titan Tower?

McMahon: Sh— no, and everybody on the fourth floor knows it. I mean, I've had television

executives call me off to the side when I was walking down the hallway on the fourth floor and say, "Did you all discuss this? Have you all made a decision on this?" The fourth floor people react, they don't get to act.

Keller: In your time there did it ever seem fathomable given the atmosphere and mindset there that it was plausible two years later WCW would be giving them a run for their money and probably pass them in public perception of who was number one?

Jarrett: I don't know. When I was there, Wade, it was like—how can I describe it? It was like there was 180,000 pounds of dynamite and there weren't any no-smoking signs around. Everybody was just expecting it to explode any minute.

Keller: Because of the trial or because of the way the company is run?

Jarrett: The on-edge aspect of everything everyday. There was this undercurrent of "what's going on?" Vince can't begin to fathom the damage that this woman [Lisa Wolfe] that was in a very, very powerful position did to that company. Everything she touched turned to sh—.

Keller: On purpose? Do you think she was evil or incompetent or unlucky?

Jarrett: I don't know what the deal was. It was the craziest thing I had ever seen in my life. She dabbled and had her hand in everything and had tremendous power. She could sink a person in a New York minute and was so disloyal to Vince. She used him. It was the kind of thing where she would say, "You know how Vince is. It's best for you not to discuss this with him. I'll handle it, Jerry." Or "I'll handle it, Joe" or "I'll handle it, Jim." To whomever it was, she said, "I'm doing everything I can do to keep you really in with Vince. You know how he is. But just trust me: I'm in your corner, I'm on your side." She did that with everybody and there are a whole lot of people who aren't there now because of her. I'm talking about top executives and top wrestlers. Vince lost some real braintrust in that company. He doesn't know he lost them because he didn't realize what they did, but now that they're gone, there's an absence.

If it sounds like I'm pulling for the WWF to make it, it's because I am. I'm not in the wrestling business and I have only one wish and desire and that is that both companies stay in business. The reason for that is if only one company survives, you can't look good in a vacuum. If you don't look good, if you're just ho-hum there, it's not the same. Think about it. If there was no WCW and Vince was getting a 2.5, that would be seen as good. If there was no WWF and Nitro hung in there between a 2.2 and a 2.5, that would look good, wouldn't it? When contract time came, the way an executive would make the profits look better would be to cut 10 percent off of everybody's pay. That wouldn't be good for my boy (laughs). So the best thing in the world to happen would be for Vince to at least quit going downhill. WCW is going to continue to do good because they've got so much momentum. I really think they will. I've seen it happening in this territory. When things are this hot and this good, you can just sit back for a while. You shouldn't do

All of us promoters get so caught up being the maestro in front of the orchestra that we forget that the wrestlers could play a whole lot better if we just let them stand up there and play. We just get so caught up in painting the canvas that sometimes we need to step back and let things take place naturally.

that because what happens is by the time it slows down and you go to doing something about it, it's too late. It continues to slow down. Even if WCW started being stupid, which I don't think they will, it's going to be good for a couple of years. If they continue to do what they're doing, keep being innovative, keep being exciting, keep coming up with creative programming, then they are liable to have a ten year run before somebody gets slow.

Keller: Did you find you were a better promoter when you had competition in your territory?

Jarrett: Oh, yeah, absolutely. One of the guys I respect the most and consider a friend, Randy Savage, when he was running against me was when I did my best because I knew he was from a family that stuck together and they would work 24 hours a day and set up the ring and whatever it took. I told everybody around me, "Boy, they're little now, but if we sit back and don't do the best we can, soon they'll have Louisville and Lexington and Evansville, then they'll move in and get Memphis and Nashville. It's hard to do good in vacuum. What's your motivation? It's socialism, which by design was dead before it started. Without competition you get ho-hum workers in a factory. The competition is good for a business. You said it in your editorial in the TORCH—in the Monday Night Wars, the fans win.

Keller: What did you think of Shawn Michaels's reign as WWF Champion in 1996?

Jarrett: Well, I think the record speaks to that. In one of your papers, just last week, you said the biggest box office run in the last ten years for anyone in the WWF was Shawn Michaels.

Keller: What about the size barrier that Michaels broke? For so long the belief was someone his size was too small to be taken seriously by the general public on top of cards.

Jarrett: I've never understood it, I never will. Of course, as you know, we were always known as a little guy's territory in here. Well, the reason we were—and there are exceptions, and The Giant is a hell of an exception—in the wrestling ring it's a theater for a smaller guy. When I say smaller guy I

mean a six-footer compared to a seven-footer. You can just do more. It can be more exciting. A smaller guy just has the versatility in the ring—not in the basketball court—that's to his advantage. We proved it here for years. Anywhere except in a wrestling locker room Shawn is a big guy. What's amazing is Jeff, my son, here when we're away from the wrestling business, he'll be home for a day and go with me for a day out on the (land development) job sight and everybody says, "Dog garr, how much does he eat? He's the biggest guy I've ever seen. He didn't look like he could get out of that little BMW of yours." He's a huge guy, but put him in the ring with The Giant and he looks like a little guy. But Shawn is plenty big and from the highlights on tape that I saw, the response of the fans indicated size wasn't a factor with them.

Keller: Was it a mistake for McMahon not to stick with Michaels? Or do you think McMahon saw what led to Michaels's hiatus coming well ahead of time and pulled away before then?

Jarrett: I don't know. I don't know all of the factors that confronted Vince when he made all those decisions. If I was sitting there and knew all the extenuating circumstances and all the factors, then I might be in a position to criticize. Not knowing everything available to him, I don't know. That's not to say what he did I sanction because I don't know all the extenuating circumstances. Michaels's timing in leaving, if I knew all of those circumstances, I might say Shawn was a bit of a sh—, but I don't know for sure the extent of his injury. I don't know if he had any pressing personal problems. I don't know the politics of what he was faced with.

Our mind is a big tablet and everything we see, hear, read, feel, and touch is written on it, so I read your piece (BBL, TORCH #428) where if you had been in Shawn Michaels's head, what might have happened. So I'm sure I'm tainted by that. But the politics of it, if Shawn Michaels is sitting there and feels like Bret left him holding the bag, then he sees the scenario coming where he's going to be second, third, maybe fourth fiddle. Maybe it was a politic thing and in his mind he may say he's justified. Maybe his knees are so bad that's career threatening.

I can relate. I sat in a doctor's office and the doctor said, "You've lost your left eye and I can't tell you you have much of a chance of avoiding going totally blind." I can tell you then that a wrestling match or anything else don't mean sh—. You don't think of anything but what that doctor's telling you and how you're going to make it through tomorrow. But with the Shawn Michaels situation, I think you did a hell of a job pointing out all of the possible things it could be. I think you were very fair in it and it is some variation of some of those things.

I like Shawn. As a promoter I might not like him as well because I can tell you, when you're a guy running a business, when you've got millions of dollars riding, that clique thing is a very threatening kind of thing. I wouldn't have tolerated it for a minute. I would have split that thing up no matter what the cost because that's a dead end street for a business. You can deal with one wrestler, but when you have all of your top men all together and one of them doesn't like something and they're all mad, your whole company is in jeopardy. That's another possibility. We don't

know what all was on Vince's mind when he had to get on planes and go to these meetings on the road back in late '95 to settle problems and disputes. I can tell you, as a promoter, that can stay with you a long time.

I'm sure that Bret Hart, talk about a guy who will stand by his convictions, whatever he tells you today he'll tell you tomorrow and he'll tell you the same thing in the back seat of a car and the next day in a board room. I know he is very concerned with the overall direction the WWF is taking. I'm sure he hasn't let up. Maybe Vince is saying, "Maybe you're right. We've tried all this goofy sh— and we're worse off than we were."

Keller: Is there anything in wrestling that compares to the Bret Hart sweepstakes where one guy was being chased by two heavy hitters to such a degree? And where that wrestler's decision could change the balance of power by either keeping things even by going to the WWF or tilting the scale heavily toward WCW by signing with them?

Jarrett: People don't grow up in the wrestling business and reach the level that Bret Hart has reached without being incredibly intelligent. And so, no, it didn't surprise me. Because there are just two companies left, everything is magnified a hundred times. But that scenario has been played out ten thousand times in every territory over and over and over. A really intelligent wrestler will save his money so he's in a position to politically make his moves. It's the old law of supply and demand. If a guy sits out and there's a diminishing supply of wrestlers out there, demand for him goes up. Bret's extremely bright. But it doesn't even take a really bright person to figure those things out.

Keller: Did you disagree with the way that either McMahon or Bischoff handled it in that they only fed the hysteria that led to each being in a position to offer so much money? With your experience from a promoter's perspective, did you look at them and think they were making a mistake by playing right into his hands?

Jarrett: No. Hell, they didn't have a choice. I mean, this is a high stakes game they are playing. This ain't no penny ante poker game. Bret Hart is a big time player. Hogan's a big time player. He scored pretty damn good. He sat out for a while. That thing will be played out over and over and over again. I don't think Eric or Vince can sit on the sidelines and twiddle their thumbs because there are not ten people out there to take Bret Hart's place.

Keller: Did Bret make the right move by staying with the WWF or is it impossible to tell just six months after the decision?

Jarrett: Yeah, how are you going to judge that? But I can tell you this for sure. If I were Bret, I wouldn't even think about whether the decision was right. He made it, it's done. It's like wondering if you should have broken up with your girlfriend after you've already told her you don't want to see her again. You can't every go back and undo it, so why even address it.

Keller: If you had McMahon's ear, knowing what you know—and granted you're not in the middle of every political situation that may be

going on among the personalities—if you had to pick a guy a build around, would you pick one guy out of Bret, Michaels, Sid, Austin, Shamrock, or Undertaker? Or would you pick someone else, a dark horse? Or would you build around several names at once and avoid the idea of having one top guy?

Jarrett: You can't not build around one guy. The old timers used to tell me—Leroy McGuirk told me one time, "Boy, you're putting too much stock in that Jerry Lawler." Roy Welch called Eddie Graham and said, "You've got your whole territory built around that damn Dusty Rhodes and he's a poison." The problem is people come to see main events. If there's a Tyson fight, people don't give a damn what the undercard is. They come to see Tyson. When Sugar Ray Leonard was fighting, he weighed 147 pounds. He was a shrimp, but he was the man. All you knew you were buying a ticket for was the Sugar Ray fight. It's that way today. You have to have a star. You can have a whole bunch of solid undercard wrestlers, and you need it in this era. With the monster television they have, Vince and Eric both had to have 10 or 15 stars who are almost as bright as that star-star. But Vince, he's the one who coined the terminology of "putting the spotlight on somebody." The problem lately has been that his spotlight operator has palsy and it jerks over here and it jerks over there and before anybody's eyes can focus on who the spotlight is on, hell, he's gone and moved it to somebody else. If he will put the spotlight on somebody and then get his contracts or whatever he had to get so he can, quit all this appeasement and go with him, then he could go to work on building momentum.

He has to build it one block at a time exactly like Eric Bischoff did, and like Vince did to start it. He can do it. I think Shamrock has potential if Vince will have the people that are there adapt to Shamrock instead of Shamrock adapting to them. Shamrock will be just another wrestler if he puts him in the ring and has him not capitalize on what brought him to the dance. Hell, he hired him because he's the toughest son of a bitch in the country. The advantage of the wrestlers is they can adapt, some of them can. They can adapt. I would take a whole different tact, totally different. That's what Eric did. That's what Vince did in the early '80s. He just did something different. Remember how different the WWF was from everybody else? I mean, Vince said, "Don't even call us wrestling." Then Eric said, "I don't want to do anything like everybody else has been doing. I want to be totally different." So it's not really reinventing the wheel for Vince to say, "I'm going to do something totally different. I'm going to make these people figure out if we're wrestling or hybrid wrestling or what we are."

I guess I'm avoiding your answer by not saying, yes, I would go with Shawn or Bret or Shamrock. I think that any of those people are capable if Vince would put the spotlight on him. That's what Eric did. He put the spotlight on Hall and Nash, the Outsiders. And then he brought Hogan in. If the spotlight's on the stage, Hogan will find it because he's savvy and smart and has so much charisma that if the spotlight just gets near him he glows. So what Eric did was he just backed that spotlight off just a little. When you back a spotlight off it makes the circle get bigger. And it shined on the NWO. But brother, it really shines on the NWO. Then

what happens is by shining that spotlight, probably the other wrestlers are down there thinking, "Well, doggonit, if they put that spotlight on me, I could do it, too." What they don't realize is that there are a dozen people down there who are becoming big stars just because they are around the NWO and that NWO spotlight.

Keller: Is it similar to what would have happened had Randy Savage returned to the WWF? Besides becoming fresh all over again to a certain extent just by being part of a new atmosphere again, his star power would have rubbed off on some of the newer WWF stars? For instance, Steve Austin and Hunter Hearst Helmsley, are heels who need some big wins over mainstream names for the rest of the general public to perceive them as superstars on that same level as Savage was during his peak years.

Jarrett: But don't sell Randy Savage short even now. He is a megastar on his own. And he is worth every penny he is getting, and I don't have a clue what he is getting. He is a megastar. The one mistake that Vince made was he didn't realize how big of a star all of these wrestlers were—Hogan, Jimmy Hart, Lex Luger, Randy Savage. Some of the big names who left McMahon like Savage transcend being a wrestler. Randy is worth whatever you have to pay him just to go talk to sponsors. I've seen him just make a bunch of businessmen's mouths water and drool at meetings. Randy went in to address them on behalf of the WWF. It was a horrible mistake for Vince to let him go. I pointed it out to Vince. I told him, "Vince, you're treating Randy like a piece of sh— and he ain't going to take it. You've hurt his feelings. He loves you, as a man, he really cares for you. And you've hurt his feelings. You ain't treating him right." Well, he lost Randy. That was his mistake, not recognizing his star quality.

That happens to Vince because those buttholes who are around Vince tell him, "You're a great puppetmaster. Don't make a sh— of difference who you got hanging on those strings, you can make anybody dance." Well, bullsh—. Vince ain't a puppetmaster and the wrestlers ain't puppets. All Vince is is a screenwriter. The best screenwriter in the world can't have a good movie if he don't have a great actors. And the best promoters in the world, I don't care how smart he is, if you don't have talent, you're just going to have a mediocre product.

Keller: Did it surprise you that McMahon did those Billionaire Ted skits early in '96 making fun of Savage and Hogan?

Jarrett: Yeah, that was stupid business. Absolutely stupid. Why would you pick a fight with Ted Turner? How asinine is that? A man who could go to Las Vegas and put a million dollars on the crap table and lose it and not lose a minute's worth of sleep? Why would they piss somebody like that off? I'm telling you that Vince does not know that he is being spoon fed this sh—. And he don't know it. It's day in and day out. Vince is sitting there getting his tail kicked on Monday nights and Vince is susceptible to human nature just like you or I. He says, "Boy, I'll show that son of a bitch." He needs one person there to say, "Vince, why do you want to do that? To hell with him. Just go on about your life. Let's do our thing

I like Shawn. As a promoter I might not like him as well because that clique thing is very threatening. I wouldn't have tolerated it for a minute. You can deal with one wrestler, but when you have all of your top men together and one of them doesn't like something and they're all mad, your whole company is in jeopardy.

and avoid negative energy." He ain't got that. Instead, he's got these dipsh—s that are saying, "Yeah, Vince, let's get 'em. You're the man. You're the man, Vince! You don't need this wrestler. To hell with him! Randy Savage? He's washed up, anyway." I've heard this one. They've told him, "You can sit anybody in that seat next to you, Vince. You're the star of that show. You don't need them."

Keller: You had a similar experience as Vince when it comes to reincarnating successful characters. In the middle of '96 McMahon introduced a new Diesel and Razor Ramon after the original two left. In the '80s you tried to introduce The New Fabulous Ones when Stan and Steve left.

Jarrett: It was insane. Like the position McMahon is in now, when I first started I didn't know until after the fact how much (Jackie) Fargo and Tojo (Yamamoto) manipulated and dominated me instead of the other way around. They said, "Look, Jarrett, you made the Fabs. Two pieces of sh— that couldn't do nothin'. You made stars out of them. You can take anybody and make another Fabs team. You did it! You're the man!" (laughs) I asked, "Okay, who do we have who we can do that with?" They said, "Anybody!" So I said we'd make new Fabs out of Tommy Rich and Eddie Gilbert. I tried it two or three times because when it didn't work at first, they told me the wrestlers fumbled the ball. "You called the right play," they'd tell me. "They just couldn't carry the ball." The fans booed us out of the arena. It got heat with the fans. The fans said, "What are you trying to do?"

Let me tell you something. Vince, in a fit of anger will say something. He is at the mercy, then, of the real-clique in the WWF. I've heard this a million times. "Ah, to hell with them Vince. Vince you could close that whole Titan Tower down and run this whole wrestling office right off of this dining room table. You don't need any of them. You're the man. You're the man. You're the man." And Vince does not have any idea that by

him being the man, the people telling him that become "the man," too. So they say, "All we need is us, Vince. Our little tight knit family. To hell with the rest of the world. Get rid of all of Titan Tower and all the wrestlers. You're the man" And what Vince don't hear is, "We the man, too! Because we're standin' right next to you."

Keller: What do you think about ECW's expansion and its rise from a part time independent to going national on pay-per-view in '97?

Jarrett: I was very surprised that Paul E. would have a pay-per-view. I thought that he was using that like I used the USWA-WWF relationship. "Come on boys, work for ECW. We're fixing to be big time!" Only the fixing would never come. That was me with the WWF deal. "Come with me and you'll be a big star in the WWF." That's what I thought Paul E. was, but lo and behold, he's really gonna do it. Lord, I don't know what the deal is with Vince promoting them now leading into it. Maybe Vince owns it? Hell, I heard a rumor that Vince is the guy who owned the USWA now, that he was the mystery financial backer. I don't really buy that. I do believe, and have always preached, you don't have a major league baseball franchise without having a farm club. It would be so simple and cost so little for either company to set up two or three farm organizations. Then they could lock up talent for nothing. It wouldn't cost a penny to lock them up. I had the entertainment lawyers research it and I could have signed everybody that ever came in here (to the USWA) and was on our TV when they first broke into the business that in exchange for converting you from an absolute nobody who the world doesn't know exists into an entity, I have the rights to you for two years. That would hold up in court if they tried to break it. Well, you don't know if the wrestlers are going to be worth sh—in two years. But think, if you had a couple of farm clubs, you'd have every up-and-coming wrestler in the country that was available. I have no idea why Vince is promoting a company that is going to be on pay-per-view in an already crowded field and really most of the world doesn't know exists. I wouldn't think the ratings bump for Vince equals the buyrate jump ECW will probably experience thanks to the exposure on his TV shows.

Keller: Is there anything in recent decades that compares to how critical some people in the industry respond to ECW's style?

Jarrett: Not that I know of. I have seen ECW one time and it was a little far out for me. Some gal, her whole rear end was sticking out. She was in the ring in a mixed match. Some guy put her head between his legs and hunched on it a couple of times. Then he picked her up and gave her a piledriver. I just said, "Boy, I'm an old son of a gun. Life has passed me by."

Keller: That doesn't sound all that different from what I've seen in recent years on what was then your program in Memphis, with women fighting each other in lingerie matches and women fighting in mixed matches? Why is what ECW does so much different or more shocking?

Jarrett: Well, who knows. Maybe it's just rationalization on my part. Remember, I haven't seen one of our (USWA) shows in two years.

From what Bill Shaw told me, the reason Eric got the job was that he was not perceived to be a wrestling person. With that in mind, Eric is probably more of a fan of the wrestling business than he wants everybody to know.

When I was doing it, it had it-what you're talking about. The difference was men are men and women are women. There is a difference between putting them on a stage and saying here are these two women and doggoneit, they are liable to rip each other's clothes off. To me, it's a giant step when you go to overt sexual gestures and gyrations with men and women.

Keller: Is it a big step or just the next step?

Jarrett: Whose to say. In my mind, it's a big step. Baywatch is a T&A show. To me, it's a giant step to go to the Movie Channel and see passionate sex on the screen. Baywatch can't make that step and still be on broadcast television. So I guess I'm following the old-line censors. It's one thing to have T&A content, but a whole other thing to have overt sexual behavior in your theater.

Keller: How big of a deal do you think it was for the cruiserweights to really come to prominence in WCW in 1996? Is that a major deal for the next few years in this business?

Jarrett: I'm surprised that it didn't happen sooner. I tried to get Vince to do it. It wasn't that I invented it or even thought of it. But when I came into this business the junior heavyweight title was right up there just a notch below the heavyweight title. It was as big of a deal for us to get Danny Hodge to come into Memphis as it was to get Lou Thesz. I think people misread Eric. He sure had me fooled. I didn't think he knew the first thing about wrestling, and certainly nothing about history. But then when I see the things he's doing, he either is an acute student of the business or he has surrounded himself with some people that are and he's smart enough to listen to them. Of course the braintrust is down there right now. He's got people down there who have been around almost as long as I have. Kevin (Sullivan) certainly appreciates the junior heavyweight title because Kevin's not seven feet tall either.

Eric is probably more of a fan of the wrestling business than he wants everybody to know. He has been in the business a long time. He was up there with Mike Shields and Verne Gagne (in the AWA). From what Bill Shaw told me, the reason Eric got the job was that he was not perceived as a wrestling person. With that in mind, Eric may position himself as not being a wrestling person when in fact from what he's doing, he's doing so many things that are really right and it's really a revival in a sense of the way it used to be. He's

just creating a junior heavyweight division. Call it cruiserweight or something different, but it's the same. The NWO thing is pretty different, totally different, too. It's a little bit of this and a little bit of that.

Keller: Why do you think McMahon hasn't followed up with his own junior division?

Jarrett: I don't have any idea. I know that Vince is really into and personally prefers big guys, so it may just be like taste, like how one person likes sherbet and another likes chocolate ice cream.

Keller: Would McMahon not do it even if it was good for business simply because Bischoff did it first? Is he that way?

Jarrett: No, no. If you could take Vince out of the environment he is in, Vince is a brilliant, sharp businessman. He's lived in this world that he's in so long that he doesn't realize what he's in. Vince wouldn't have any qualms about doing what is best and smartest for the WWF. It may be so simple that he likes big guys and that's what he's going to go with.

Keller: How influential has UFC been to worked pro wrestling?

Jarrett: I think it has had a tremendous effect in a subliminal kind of way. An example I'll use is I think if Ultimate Fighting was not around, I think both promoters would have more of an inclination for the Giant to jump off the top of a building. But with the Ultimate Fighting being there and seeing the level of excitement and seeing what I think is phenomenal success considering they have to fight for their mere existence with politicians and cities just to get in buildings, not to have any chance at television and the normal advertising streams to promote your events, yet they even put on their events. I'm sure Vince and Eric, in a subliminal way, realize they are there. And so I think whatever input Kevin has or the booking committee and what they're thinking, I'm sure in the back of their mind, maybe not overtly, but at least subconsciously, they think: "We really shouldn't look too stupid. We shouldn't get too cornball."

And the real tell tale sign that it may be more than subliminal is that Vince would sign Shamrock for astronomical dollars, enough money to get him away from what Japan was offering him. Shamrock ain't never drawn 15 cents in our business. It may be a lot more than subliminal that he is paying whatever amount of money it took to get him. I mean, all Shamrock's really done is establish himself as a tough son of a gun in a cult sport.

Keller: What is your opinion on the view politicians and media have taken in wanting to ban UFC?

Jarrett: Most of them don't have a clue as to what they're talking about.

Keller: Did you ever experience such a do-what-looks-good-on-the-surface, cavalier, uneducated approach by politicians and media in wrestling promoting?

Jarrett: Absolutely. I have been involved with politicians and fundraising and have really been in some positions where I could have some real input with them on the state and to some extent on the

national level. Before I say this, the exceptions are my friend Al Gore and my friend Ned Ray McWherter. The governor announced his candidacy from a party I had for him here at the house. Al, I had a fundraiser for him from the time he first ran for congress and senator. I knew his father. They are the exceptions. Other than them, I have not found a whole lot of depth in politicians. They normally have a staff around them that tells them which way they think the wind's blowing. Keep this in mind. They have such a hectic life. They have an unbelievable schedule in the congress or in the senate. Then they have to do fundraising 365 days a year. Theoretically they are supposed to study and know what they are voting on which is volumes and reams. No speed reader can read all the bills and all the background that they are supposed to know before they vote. So they have their staff doing it. Then they get synopses written. Then they are shaking hands and raising money and then they're appeasing the folks back at home and they have to make so many visits to them. So it's just about an impossible mission to serve well and be elected. Then they've got their staff that tries to bring them up to date on what they're voting on and how they're running our country. Then they've got the other arm of their staff that is over here tugging on them keeping them either in publicity or out of hot water or on the right track and that's their political arm. Those people, it would be great if we could somehow abolish them.

They are the ones who will have somebody make an absolute ass out of themselves and come out against Ultimate Fighting because they take three clips and say, "These are people who are really trying to kill each other." They don't go to the doctors and they don't talk to them and say, "If somebody hits a guy with a fist one or two or fives times, and another guy hits a guy with a boxing glove in the head 87 times, what's the most dangerous?" Of course, all the doctors will tell you, "Well, the hand is not as tough as the head. So the hand will break first, so you won't absorb many blows. Or you'll get hit on a critical spot and you'll get knocked out and you only get one blow. And the odds of one punch killing somebody are about eight million to one. Now the real damage, brain damage, are 87 blows one at a time jarring that brain against the skull." So they don't have any background, they don't have time to reverse it, and it's a political staffer whose responsible for that saying, "Look, here is a soap box we can get on and it won't offend anybody and it will sound right." It's part of the crazy process.

Keller: Do you think UFC will fall to the same fate that real wrestling matches did early this century? Or will UFC, ignorant and misguided politicians and media notwithstanding, be around in ten or fifteen years?

Jarrett: What I'm hoping will happen is that whoever it is that owns the UFC will subscribe to the TORCH and do what you suggested they do last month in that editorial. Then they'll give pro wrestling a run for its money. And I think that would be great for the sport overall. They should soften their approach, don't advertise the blood. They need to get smarter, get savvy. Don't do what Vince did and slap a sleeping giant like Ted Turner. Just tiptoe around him. Why go on and advertise: "Fight to the death!" Hell, all they got to do is say,

"This is the real deal, folks. Tune in." Then the only thing I would add to it is I think they ought to add a couple more rules. They said before that the sport would be dead if they passed any of the time limit rules because Gracie will get out of it. Well, hell, that's like saying if Jarrett gets out of the wrestling business it will fold Tennessee. Bull. The sport will go on without Gracie and it will go on without Shamrock. The only thing it won't go on without is some business sense. Old adages become old adages because they're true. And one of them is: You don't fight City Hall. They're running into all of this City Hall stuff. Don't fight them. Sit down and figure out how they can keep the sport's integrity, but change it so it's acceptable because the whole world wants to see a real contest between two people. They used to fill the coliseum in Rome to see it. They need to tip-toe around City Hall with some semblance of our integrity by compromising a little. If they do that and follow the manuscript you gave them for the publicity, I think they've got a viable sport. I enjoy the hell out of it. I buy every pay-per-view that comes on.

Keller: Have you ever seen anything like the Sullivan-Bischoff-Pillman and Sullivan-Benoit charades in '96 where the boss worked with one of his wrestlers and tried to fool the rest of the locker room into thinking it was real?

Jarrett: There was a time once where Buddy Phillips and Lee Fields had a real life dispute over a very, very personal issue and it got really heated. Buddy challenged Lee to a real fight in the ring. He said he's rather shoot him, but he said he'd just go to jail so the next best thing was beating him up. All of the boys knew about it being a shoot, so everybody called everybody and soon the fans heard about it. The night of the fight Buddy looked at the turnout and said to Ed, "We can't blow this off tonight. We're going to have to work this to build toward a rematch." (laughs) Let me tell you, wrestlers drove and flew in from other territories to see the big shoot because they both had a bit of a reputation. Everybody thought it was going to be really good. The first thing you know one of them threw the other one in and backdropped him. Everyone just moaned. Buddy's dad, Roy, is the one that told me the story. He said he was standing back there thinking he was going to see this hell of a shoot and drove from Nashville to see it and right away realized they were working the match instead.

I've seen things near what happened in WCW in '96. I don't understand it. Neither of us really knows what's going on. If Benoit were playing around with Sullivan's wife, the simple thing would be for Sullivan to go in and tell Eric to fire the wrestler. Without that happening then you kind of assume it's a work. If it's a work, I just don't see it making any sense to bother with it.

Keller: Was it common at all for a booker to go off into the corner with another wrestler and devise a plan to fool the rest of the locker room just for kicks, just to break the monotony?

Jarrett: No, but remember back in those days we didn't allow the scandal sheets, the kayfabe sheets. We didn't talk to you all. We ran off anybody who we found out was. So there wasn't anything like the internet and chat rooms. So it was a different world. We didn't have any reason for there to be things we wanted wrestlers to believe so they would go talk it up and get the internet and sheets

to print it. It's a different world. So maybe there's some intrinsic value in having the boys buy something—if that's what's happening. I don't know that. But if it is, I don't understand it.

Keller: Finally, what's your take on the WWF's softening of their stringent drug policy in the sense that they cut back on random testing?

Jarrett: I know for a fact it was terribly expensive. I know that Vince felt it was an uneven playing field, that he was having to test. And then when you test it opens a whole can of worms because you either have to test fairly and evenhandedly and you have to deal out the punishment fairly or evenhandedly. Failure to do so can open you up to incredible lawsuits from those people who were unfairly tested and unfairly disciplined. So Vince, I'm sure, perceived that WCW was not testing as stringently as he was. So then I guess it donned on him, "Why am I putting myself in this position?" I was not privy when I was there to any of the drug testing information. But I'm just going to speculate that everybody was not tested or dealt with equally. I'm going to further assume that if that were the case and then as the mix changed and there were people who maybe had information about some unequal treatment who then left the company, it probably all factored together and Vince said, "What am I doing? Why am I testing? I don't have to. I'm spending an astronomical amount of money and the little bit of benefit I get out of it—good publicity being one of them—could be more than offset if word got out about uneven testing." I think that combination of factors made him say, "I'm going to test at random when I chose to test. If I see somebody I believe certain is on drugs, I'm going to have the liberty to test them." One person he can discipline on the spot and it won't affect business. And another person, by suspending them, it will cost him a million in revenue. You have a tendency to put off suspending that second guy for a couple of months.

I wouldn't have tested. One day I asked Vince, "Why the hell do you do that?" And he gave me the company policy line. But my opinion was, if it's not required, I wouldn't do it. I was up there right during the trial. A couple of things happened, and although I wasn't in on who was tested and what the results were, I knew after the fact. They'd say somebody failed a drug test and we would have to scramble to keep the policy honest and not lose the main event for Wrestlemania or SummerSlam.

I will condone and support my children in just about any screw up they have except for two things. One is drinking and driving. There is no second chance after that. No three strikes. You do that and you're out of here. And number two is drugs. But I didn't understand why Vince tested for as many things as he tested for. When you go on a tour for 21 days and you get a bruise on your hip that goes all the way to your hip bone and through to the other side, and it hurts you lay down in bed at night, let alone wrestle, you are apt to take a pain pill to finish the tour. He tested pain pills, marijuana, steroids, and more. He doubled the cost of the testing by testing for so much stuff. I don't think any company as any obligation to police the morality of a person. I just don't think that's required. If somebody is a pothead to the point you know it without testing, then have the right to test so that you have a legal right to lay

Vince is at the mercy of the real clique in the WWF. I've heard this a million times. "Ah, to hell with them Vince. You don't need any of them. You're the man. All we need is us, Vince. Our little tight knit family. You're the man" And what Vince don't hear is: "We the man, too! Because we're standin' right next to you, Vince."

them off or whatever you want to do. If somebody is on pain pills, uppers, downers, the whole ball of wax, I don't have to have somebody go pee in a bottle to know that. You're going to be able to tell it by being around them. Then you go test them.

That was my whole point during the trial. I said, "Vince, if you just have some people who are working that don't look like Greek gods, they're going to get off of your back. What got you in trouble was you had a roster of guys who all looked the same. And you didn't have anybody who wasn't a monster. That's what pissed everybody off, Vince. Now with the mix of talent you've got in here, nobody thinks there's a steroid problem here. Nobody thinks there's a marijuana or pain pill problem. I don't think there is, and I'm here with them."

I was trying to look at ways for the company to make more money and that was an enormous expense. In order to have credible tests, you had to have a witness taking the samples, and you've got to mark them and label them and verify them, and it's got to go through this process, and then it goes to this lab and an expensive doctor has to be responsible for the results, then he's got to report back to J.J. Dillon and J.J. had to carry the bad news to Vince. The cost of the test probably factored into the millions when you consider all of the changes a failed test brought about on the company. It was very expensive to have the testing. Then the repercussions of sorting it all out. I'm not talking about top guys. Just losing anybody on a tour when everything is booked and that wrestler is in a storyline, then you have to have a storyline for why they're off because you can't very well say, "Oh, well, old Joe here, who we've told you you ought to love and have your children emulate, why he got busted for dope." So they wrote something else into the storyline. It was a crazy thing. They need to keep the business as clean as possible, but when your human judgement isn't enough to decide when to test; then I think it's gone crazy. I don't know about his motives or his timing, but I don't blame him at all for cutting back on that expense last year.

1996 YEARBOOK APPENDIX

PAST SECONDARY AWARD WINNERS

15. Best Workrate ("Outstanding Wrestler" pre-1992)

1995: Shawn Michaels, Eddie Guerrero, Chris Benoit
1994: Sabu, Shawn Michaels, Bret Hart
1993: Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels, Vader
1992: Ric Flair, Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels
1991: Ric Flair, Cactus Jack, Arn Anderson
1990: Ric Flair, Curt Hennig, Bobby Eaton
1989: Ric Flair, Terry Funk, Rick Steamboat

16. Independent MVP

1995: Sabu, Cactus Jack, Devon Storm
1994: Sabu, Al Snow, Cactus Jack
1993: Sabu, Terry Funk, Jerry Lawler
1992: Lightning Kid, Eddie Gilbert, Terry Funk
1991: Lightning Kid, Cactus Jack, Eddie Gilbert
1990: Ricky Rice, Terry Funk, Cactus Jack
1989: Ricky Rice, Jerry Lawler, Scotty the Body (Scott Levy)

17. Rookie of the Year

1995: The Giant, Steve Richards, Devon Storm
1994: Jean Paul LeVesque (Hunter Hearst Helmsley), Mikey Whipwreck, Alex Wright
1993: Sabu, Chris Candido, Smoking Gunns
1992: Brian Christopher, Too Cold Scorpio, Dallas Page
1991: Lightning (1-2-3) Kid, Johnny B. Badd, Jerry Lynn
1990: Steve Austin, El Gigante, J.W. Storm
1989: Wayne Bloom, Dustin Rhodes, Larry Cameron
1988: Scott Steiner, Ricky Rice, Derrick Dukes

18. Promotion of the Year

1995: ECW, WWF, WCW
1994: ECW, WWF, AAA/IWC
1993: SMW, WWF, WCW
1992: SMW, WWF, USWA
1991: WCW, WWF, TWA (Philadelphia)
1990: WCW, USWA, WWF
1989: NWA, WWF, Portland
1988: WWF, NWA, CWA (now USWA)

19. Non-TV Promotion of the Year

1995: NWA New Jersey, Midwest Territorial, Peach State Wrestling
1994: NWA New Jersey, NWA Michigan, Midwest Territorial (Mich.)
1993: NWA World Wrestling Alliance (NJ), CWA (Ind.), Big D Pro (Dallas)
1992: WWA (NJ), ECW (Phila.), PWA (Minn.)

20. Promoter of the Year

1995: Vince McMahon, Paul Heyman, Tod Gordon
1994: Vince McMahon, Tod Gordon, Paul Heyman
1993: Jim Cornette, Vince McMahon, Paul Heyman
1992: Jim Cornette, Vince McMahon, Kip Frey

21. Angle of the Year

1995: Shawn Michaels collapses, Bam Bam Bigelow shoved Lawrence Taylor, Cactus Jack turns anti-hardcore
1994: Sandman fakes being blinded, Backlund goes psycho, then tricks parents at Survivor Series
1993: Lawler-Hart at SummerSlam, Kid upsets Ramon on Raw, Flair retires if loses at Starrcade
1992: Hennig's Prime Time turn; Savage-Flair-Elizabeth; Michaels-Jannetty break-up
1991: Undertaker locks Ultimate Warrior in a casket; Flair's entrance into WWF; Savage bitten by Roberts's

cobra

1990: Gilbert hits Lawler with speeding car; Windham doubles as Sting and gets pinned; Sting thrown out as member of Four Horsemen

22. Rising Star ("Most Improved" pre-1992)

1995: Hunter Hearst Helmsley, Eddie Guerrero, Mikey Whipwreck
1994: Diesel, Sabu, Jean Pierre LeVesque (Hunter)
1993: Too Cold Scorpio, Sabu, 1-2-3 Kid
1992: Shawn Michaels, Brian Christopher, Too Cold Scorpio
1991: Dustin Rhodes, Steve Austin, Cactus Jack
1990: Ron Simmons, Scott Steiner, Butch Reed
1989: Lex Luger, Scott Steiner, Rick Rude
1988: Sting, Rick Steiner, Lex Luger

23. Career Tailspin of the Year ("Most Deproved" pre-1992)

1995: Shane (Dean) Douglas, Hulk Hogan, Bam Bam Bigelow
1994: Ric Flair, Lex Luger, Undertaker
1993: Rick Rude, Mr. Perfect, Sid Vicious
1992: Owen Hart, Ron Simmons, Hulk Hogan
1991: Hulk Hogan, Lex Luger, Roddy Piper
1990: Sting, Dusty Rhodes, Kerry Von Erich
1989: Terry Taylor, Dino Bravo, Hacksaw Duggan
1988: Dusty Rhodes, Greg Valentine, Ken Patera

24. Best Weekly TV Show

1995: ECW, WWF Raw, WCW Nitro
1994: WWF Raw, ECW syndicated, WCW Sat. Night
1993: WWF Raw, SMW, ECW
1992: SMW, WWF Superstars, WWF Prime Time
1991: WCW Sat., WWF Superstars, WWF Prime
1990: WCW Sat., WWF Superstars, USWA Challenge (Dallas)
1989: NWA World Championship (Sat.), NWA Power Hour, WWF Superstars
1988: WWF Superstars, NWA World Championship (Sat.), WWF Saturday Night's Main Event (not weekly).

25. Most Embarrassing Wrestler

1995: Goldust, Hulk Hogan, Dave Sullivan
1994: Dave Sullivan, Doink, Hulk Hogan
1993: Shockmaster, Bastion Booger, Doink
1992: Papa Shango, Erik Watts, Van Hammer
1991: Van Hammer, P.N. News, Oz (Kevin Nash)

26. Worst Wrestler (with a semblance of a push)

1995: Hulk Hogan, Renegade, Hacksaw Duggan
1994: Dave Sullivan, Hulk Hogan, Hacksaw Duggan
1993: Equalizer, Shockmaster, Giant Gonzales
1992: Erik Watts, Nailz, Van Hammer
1991: Van Hammer, Bill Kazmaier, Oz
1990: Junkyard Dog, Ultimate Warrior, Night Stalker (a/k/a Adam Bomb)
1989: Andre the Giant, Ultimate Warrior, Zeus
1988: Andre the Giant, Ultimate Warrior, Junkyard Dog

27. Best Announcing Team

1995: McMahon & Lawler, Schiavone & Heenan, Schiavone & Rhodes
1994: Schiavone & Heenan, McMahon & Lawler, Cruise & Mike Tenay
1993: McMahon & Heenan, Schiavone & Ventura, Caudle & Mantel
1992: Bobby Heenan & Gorilla Monsoon, Bob Caudle & Dutch Mantel, Vince McMahon & Mr. Perfect
1991: Jim Ross & Paul E. Dangerously, Monsoon & Heenan, McMahon & Roddy Piper & Randy Savage
1990: Ross & Dangerously, McMahon & Jesse Ventura, Monsoon & Heenan

1989: McMahon & Ventura, Ross & Jim Cornette, Ross & Caudle.

28. Best on Interviews

1995: Cactus Jack, Shawn Michaels, Ric Flair
1994: Ric Flair, Shane Douglas, Cactus Jack
1993: Ric Flair, Jim Cornette, Jerry Lawler
1992: Ric Flair, Jim Cornette, Cactus Jack

29. Most Underutilized

1995: Al Snow (Avitar), Body Donna Skip (Chris Candido), Dean Douglas
1994: Brian Pillman, Steve Austin, 1-2-3 Kid
1993: Chris Benoit, Terry Taylor, Bobby Eaton
1992: Terry Taylor, Arn Anderson, Scotty Flamingo (Levy)

30. Most Overpushed

1995: Hulk Hogan, Lex Luger, Dungeon of Doom
1994: Hulk Hogan, Hacksaw Duggan, Lex Luger
1993: Sid Vicious, Lex Luger, Dustin Rhodes
1992: Erik Watts, Van Hammer, Tatanka

31. Most Insulting Stereotype

1995: Goldust, Sonny Onno, The Gangstas
1994: The Gangstas, Men on a Mission, Dave Sullivan
1993: Yokozuna, Missy Hyatt, Harlem Heat
1992: Razor Ramon, Missy Hyatt, Papa Shango

32. Best Wrestling Maneuver

1995: Rey Jr. top rope huracanrana, Sabu table moonsault, Rocco Rock table moonsault
1994: Sabu moonsault table break, Vader moonsault, Vader inverted powerbomb
1993: Vader's moonsault, Scorpio's 450 degree splash, Scott Steiner's Frankensteiner
1992: Scorpio's 450 degree splash, Frankensteiner, Liger Shooting Star Press

33. Worst Wrestling Maneuver

1994: Hogan legdrop, Butcher sleeper, Honky Tonk Man neckbreaker
1993: Shockmaster's bearhug, Crush's headvice, Lex Luger's loaded forearm
1992: Erik Watts STF, Crush's head vice, Shango's voodoo

34. Worst Match

1995: Hogan vs. Vader (3/19), Mabel vs. Yokozuna (10/22), Hogan vs. Giant (10/29)
1994: Midget Mixed Tag (S. Series), Undertaker vs. Undertaker (S.Slam), Flair vs. Hogan (H. Havoc)
1993: Doink's vs. Bigelow et al (No. 24), Shockmaster vs. Kong (Dec. 27), War Games (Sept. 19)
1992: Rick Rude vs. Masa Chono (Oct. 25), Hogan vs. Sid Justice (Apr. 5), Todd Champion vs. Super Invader (May 17)

35. Worst Personality

1995: Hulk Hogan, Eric Bischoff, Steve McMichael
1994: Hulk Hogan, Dave Sullivan, Eric Bischoff
1993: Sid Vicious, Lex Luger, Lord Steven Regal
1992: Erik Watts, Van Hammer, Papa Shango

36. Worst Interviews

1995: Hulk Hogan, Renegade, Alex Wright
1994: Dave Sullivan, Hulk Hogan, Bob Backlund
1993: Scott Steiner, Ice Train, Crush
1992: Erik Watts, Tony Atlas, Van Hammer

37. Readers' Personal Favorite Wrestler

1995: Shawn Michaels, Ric Flair, Chris Benoit
1994: Ric Flair, Sabu, Shawn Michaels

1996 YEARBOOK APPENDIX

1993: Ric Flair, Shawn Michaels, Vader
1992: Ric Flair, Bret Hart, Ron Simmons

38: Readers' Least Favorite Wrestler

1995: Hulk Hogan, Dave Sullivan, Mabel
1994: Hulk Hogan, Doink, Dave Sullivan
1993: Sid Vicious, Dusty Rhodes, Equalizer
1992: Erik Watts, Ultimate Warrior, Nailz

39: Japan Tag Team of the Year

1995: Kobashi & Misawa, Chono & Tenzan, Kyoko & Takako Inoue
1994: Misawa & Kobashi, Hawk & Sasaki, Steiners
1993: Toyota & Yamada, Hell Raisers, Misawa & Kobashi
1992: Manami Toyota & Toshiyo Yamada, Mitsuharu Misawa & Toshiaki Kawada, Terry Gordy & Steve Williams
1991: Hiroshi Hase & Kensuke Sasaki, Misawa & Kawada, Gordy & Williams.
1990: Williams & Gordy, Chono & Muto, Misawa & Kawada

40: Japan Feud of the Year

1995: New Japan vs. UWFI, Muto vs. Hashimoto, Funk vs. Cactus Jack
1994: Williams vs. Kobashi, Williams vs. Kawada, Onita vs. Pogo
1993: Misawa et al vs. Kobashi et al, WAR vs. Skinheads, Hansen vs. Kobashi
1992: Liger vs. Samurai, Misawa & Co. vs. Tsuruta & Co., Chono vs. Muto
1991: Misawa vs. Tsuruta, Gordy & Williams vs. Misawa & Kawada, Vader vs. Tatsumi Fujinami
1990: Misawa vs. Tsuruta, Liger vs. Naoki Sano, Luger vs. Pegasus Kid (Chris Benoit)

41: Japan Match of the Year

1995: Kawada & Taue vs. Misawa & Kobashi (6/9), Toyota vs. Kyoko Inoue (5/7), Kawada & Taue vs. Misawa & Kobashi (1/24)
1994: Aja Kong vs. Toyota (11/20), Benoit vs. Sasuke (4/16), Liger vs. Sasuke (4/16)
1993: Kansai & Ozaki vs. Toyota & Yamada (Apr. 11), Kobashi vs. Williams (Aug. 31), Hansen vs. Kobashi (July 29)
1992: Toyota vs. Yamada (8/15), Chono vs. Muta (NWA tourn.), Toyota vs. Inoue (5/92)
1991: Hase & Sasaki vs. Steiners (3/9), Misawa & Kawada & Kobashi vs. Tsuruta & Akira Taue & Masa Fuchi (4/20), Liger vs. Owen Hart (4/28)

42: Japan Promotion of the Year

1995: New Japan, All Japan Women, All Japan
1994: New Japan, All Japan Women, All Japan
1993: All Japan Women, All Japan (Men), New Japan
1992: New Japan, All Japan, All Japan Women
1991: All Japan, New Japan, All Japan Women
1990: All Japan, New Japan, UWF (now defunct)

43: Mexican Feud of the Year

1995: Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis, Misterioso vs. Volador, Misterio vs. Guerrero
1994: Konnan vs. Perro Aguayo, Los Gringos Locos vs. AAA, Konnan vs. Jake Roberts

44: Mexican Match of the Year

1995: Rey Jr. vs. Psicosis (10/7), Rey Sr. & Jr. vs. Guerreras (3/2), Misterio vs. Volador (7/14)

CHRIS ZAVISA'S TOP 100 JAPAN MATCHES OF 1996

(The list includes only matches that were either televised or made available via commercial video tape.)

1/3: AJW, Manami Toyota & Kauro Itoh vs. Kyoko & Takako Inoue (Tokyo, Korakuen Hall)
1/4: NJ, Koji Kanemoto vs. Jushin Liger, Antonio Inoki vs. Vader (Tokyo Dome)
1/21: LLPW, Yasha Kurenai & Carol Midori & Mikiko Futagami vs. Shinobu Kandori & Rumi Kazama & Karuula (Korakuen)
1/21: NK, El Samuri vs. Shinjiro Otani (Korakuen Hall)
1/22: AJW, Inoues vs. Akira Hokuto & Mima Shimoda (Tokyo Gym)
2/15: NJ, Liger & Black Tiger vs. Otani & Kanemoto (Murakame)
3/2: Kenta Kobashi & Jun Akiyama vs. Toshiaki Kawada & Akira Taue, Yoshinorio Ogawa vs. Tsuyoshi Kikuchi (Tokyo Budokan)
3/16: Michinoku Pro, Taka Michinoku & Gran Naniwa & Super Delphin vs. Great Sasuke & Tiger Mask & Shiryu (Tokyo)
3/17: NJ, Liger vs. Otani (Amagasaki)
3/20: AJW, Toyota vs. Sakie Hasegawa (Hakata Star Lanes)
3/20: NJ, Otani vs. Chris Benoit (Nagoya)
3/31: AJ, Misawa & Kobashi vs. Kawada & Taue (Nagoya)
3/31: AJW, Aja Kong & Combat Toyotda & Cooga vs. Megumi Judo & Bison Kimura & Kauro, Toyota vs. Kyoko Inoue (Yokohama)
4/5: NJ, Kiji Muto & Kensuke Sasaki vs. Masa Chono & Hiroyoshi Tenzan, Liger & El Samuri & Gran Hamada vs. Otni & T. Michinoku & Kanemoto (Korakuen)
4/9: AJW, Toyota & Itoh vs. Kong & Shimoda (Korakuen)
4/10: AJ, Kobashi vs. Steve Williams (Kyoto)
4/14: AJ, Kawada vs. Misawa (Sendai)
4/19: UWFI/NJ, Nobuhiko Takada & Kanehara vs. Riki Choshu & Sasaki (Osaka)
4/19: WAR, Rey Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis (Sapporo)
4/20: AJ, Taue vs. Steve Williams, Gary Albright & Johnny Ace & Kawada vs. Misawa & Kobashi & Akiyama (Budokan)
4/29: NJ, Liger vs. Sasuke, Takada vs. Hashimoto, Steiners & Scott Norton vs. Road Warriors & Sasaki (Tokyo Dome)
5/5: FMW, Cactus Jack vs. Wing Kanemura (Kawasaki Stadium)
5/14: JWP, Dynamite Kansai & Tomoko Miyaguchi vs. Hikari Fukuoka & Candy Okutsu (Korakuen)
5/16: AJW, Inoues vs. Toyota & Shimoda (Yokohama)
5/23: AJ, Taue & Kawada vs. Misawa & Akiyama (Sapporo)
5/24: AJ, Kawada & Kobashi vs. Misawa & Taue (Sapporo)
6/5: NJ, Otani vs. Black Tiger (Beppu)
6/7: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Williams & Ace (Budokan)
6/9: Toyota & Mariko Yoshida & Chaparita Asari vs. Kong & K. Inoue & Rie Tamada (Korakuen)
6/11: NJ, Benoit vs. Black Tiger (Eddie Guerrero) (Hiroshima)
6/12: NK, Liger vs. Black Tiger (Osaka)
6/17: NK, Super Delphin vs. T. Michinoku, Sasuke vs. Black Tiger (Budokan)
6/22: AJW, Inoues vs. Toyota & Shimoda (Sapporo)
6/23: Michinoku, Sasuke & Delphin vs. Mens Taoh & Shiryu & Dick Togo
6/24: NK, Hashimoto & Liger & Junji Hirata vs. Chono & Tenzan & Hiro Saito (Seratopia Toki)
7/7: JWP, Fukuoka & Kauro vs. Kansai & Cutie Suzuki (Korakuen)
7/9: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Kawada & Taue (Kanazawa)
7/24: AJ, Taue vs. Kobashi (Budokan)
8/3: NJ, Otani vs. Negro Casas (Tokyo Sumo Hall)
8/4: NJ, Dragon vs. Otani, Sasuke vs. Samurai (Tokyo Sumo Hall)
8/4: AJW, Toyota & Toshiyo Yamada vs. Mita & Shimoda, Asari vs. Yoshida (Korakuen)
8/5: NJ, Sasuke vs. Dragon (Sumo Hall)
8/6: Chono vs. Muto, Shiro Koshinaka vs. Satoshi Kojima (Sumo Hall)
8/10: JWP, Okutsu & Fukuoka & Miyaguchi vs. Suzuki & Devil masami & Borshoi Kid (Korakuen)
8/13: AJW, Kansai & Tomoko Kuzumi vs. Tomoko Watanabe & Kumiko Maekawa, Toyota & Tamada vs. K. Inoue & Asari, Kansai & Kuzumi vs. Kong & Yoshiko Yamura (Budokan)
8/30: AJW, Toyota & Taumra vs. Yamada & Tamada, Kong vs. K. Inoue (Osaka)
9/1: AJW, Yumi Fukawa & Tamada vs. Suger Sato & Chikaki Nagashima, Asari vs. Chiquita Azteca (Korakuen)
9/5: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Williams & Ace, Kobashi vs. Stan Hansen (Budokan)
9/7: Pancrase, Vernon White vs. Yoshiki Takahashi, Frank Shamrock, vs. Yuki Kondo, Bas Rutten vs. Masa Funaki (Tokyo Bay NK Hall)
9/11: UWFI, Takada vs. Genichiro Tenryu (Jimgu Stadium)
9/23: NJ, Koshinaka vs. Hashimoto (Yokohama)
9/25: RINGS, VBolk Han vs. Kiyoshi Tamura (Osaka)
9/28: AJ, Kawada & Taue & Ogawa vs. Misawa & Akiyama & Saturo Asako (Korakuen)
9/28: AJW, Toyota & Shimoda vs. Itoh & Yoshida (Hakata)
10/6: AJW, Mariko Yoshida vs. Takako Inoue, Manami Toyota vs. Aja Kong (Nagoya)
10/10: Michinoku, Togo & Taoh & Shiryu & Michinoku & Shoichi Funaki vs. Naniwa & Hamada & Delphin & Tiger Mask & Yakushiji (Sumo Hall)
10/11: WAR, Great Muta vs. Renryu, Sasuke vs. Dragon, Misterio Jr. vs. Psicosis (Osaka)
10/12: AJ, Williams & Ace vs. Kobashi & Patriot (Nagoya)
10/13: JWP, Mayumi Ozaki & Rieko Amano & S. Sato vs. Suzuki & Plum Mariko & Kanako Motoya, Sasuke & Tiger Mask & Fukuoka Hiroumi Yagi vs. Delphin & Naniwa & Okutsu & Borshoi Kid (Sumo Hall)
10/16: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Williams & Ace (Korakuen)
10/18: AJ, Kobashi vs. Kawada (Budokan)
10/25: NJ, Muto & Rick Steiner vs. Kojima & Nakanishi (Miyazaki)
10/28: NJ, Muto vs. R. Steiner vs. Chono & Tenzan (Kagoshima)
11/1: NJ, Hashimoto & Norton vs. Muto & R. Steiner

PRO WRESTLING TORCH Yearbook 1996 • 69

1996 YEARBOOK APPENDIX

(Hiroshima)

11/22: AJ, Kawada & Taue vs. Williams & Ace,
Misawa & Akiyama vs. Kobashi & Patriot (Okayama)

11/29: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Taue & Kawada
(Sapporo)

12/6: AJ, Misawa & Akiyama vs. Taue & Kawada
(Budokan)

12/8: AJW, Manami Toyota vs. Kyoko Inoue (Sumo
Hall)

12/11: FMW, Hayabusa vs. Great Sasuke
(Komazawa Gym, Tokyo)

12/13: WAR, Ultimo Dragon vs. Rey Misterio Jr.
(Sumo Hall)

12/22: AJW, Kong & Hotta & T. Inoue & Tamura
vs. Fukawa & K. Inoue & Yamada & Shimoda & Mita
& Watanabe

BIG THREE ROSTERS & REAL NAMES

*(The names included on the respective rosters are
current as of March 1997. Wrestlers listed are not
necessarily under contract with the respective
company, but had at least worked for it recently.)*

WWF (ring name... real name)

Steve Austin... Steve Williams
Bob Backlund... Robert Backlund
Paul Bearer... William Moody
Justin Hawk Bradshaw... John Hawk
Brooklyn Brawler... Steve Lombardi
D. Lo Brown (NOD)... A.C. Connor
Leif Cassidy... Allen Sarven
China... Joanie Lee
Jim Cornette... James Cornette
Crush... Bryan Adams
Diesel (new version)... Glen Jacobs
Jose Estrada Jr.... Jose Estrada Jr.
Faarooq... Ron Simmons
Freddie Joe Floyd... Tracey Smothers
Flash Funk... Charles Skaggs
Doug Furnas... Doug Furnas
Henry Godwinn... Mark Canterbury
Phinnus Godwinn... Dennis Knight
Goldust... Dustin Runnels
The Goon... Bill Irwin
Bart Gunn... Mike Pochlopeck
Billy Gunn... Monte Sopp
Bret Hart... Bret Hart
Owen Hart... Owen Hart
Headbanger Mosh... Glen Ruth
Headbanger Thrasher... Charles Warrington
Hunter Helmsely... Paul Michael Levesque
Dok Hendrix... Michael Seitz
Bob Holly... William Robert Howard
T.L. Hopper... Tony Anthony
Barry Horowitz... Barry Horowitz
J.C. Ice (NOD)... James Crookshanks
Ahmed Johnson... Tony Norris
Phil LaFon... Phil LaFon
Jerry Lawler... Jerry Lawler
Latin Lover (AAA)... Victor Resindez
Rocky Maivia... Duane Johnson
Mankind... Michael Foley
Marc Mero... Marc Mero
Marlena... Terri Runnels
Heavy Metal (AAA)... Erick Casas
Shawn Michaels... Michael Hickenbottom
Aldo Montoya... P.J. Walker
Road Warrior Animal... Joe Laurinaitis
Road Warrior Hawk... Mike Hegstrand
Miguel Perez... Miguel Perez
Alex Porteau... Alex Porteau
Brian Pillman... Brian Pillman
Razor Ramon (new version)... Rick Bogner

Jake Roberts... Aurelian Smith Jr.

Sable... Rena Mero

Sycho Sid... Sid Eudy

Salvatore Sincere... Tom Brandi

Ken Shamrock... Ken Shamrock

Davey Boy Smith... David Smith

Sultan... Solofa Fatu

Sunny... Noreen Tamara Sytch

Undertaker... Mark Callaway

Vader... Leon White

Savio Vega... Juan Rivera

Barry Windham... Barry Windham

Wolfie D (NOD)... Kelly Wolfe

Dr. X... Tom Prichard

Yokozuna... Rodney Anoia

WCW

Arn Anderson... Marty Lunde
Brad Armstrong... Robert James Jr.
Scott Armstrong... Scott James
Steve Armstrong... Steve James
Marcus Bagwell... Marcus Bagwell
Barbarian... Sionne Vailahi
Chris Benoit... Christopher Benoit
Bunkhouse Buck... James Golden
Super Calo... Rafael Garcia
Ace Darling (Extremists)... Ace Darling
Ted DiBiase... Ted DiBiase
Diamond Doll... Kimberly Falkenberg
Hacksaw Duggan... Jim Duggan
Ultimo Dragon... Yoshihiro Asai
Bobby Eaton... Bobby Eaton
Elizabeth... Elizabeth Hewlet
Mike Enos... Michael Enos
Ric Flair... Richard Fliehr
Glacier...
Giant... Paul Wight
Joe Gomez... Joe Gomez
Johnny Grunge... Mike Durham
Juventud Guerrera... Anibal Gonzalez
Eddie Guerrero... Eduardo Guerrero
Chavo Guerrero Jr.... Salvador Guerrero III)
Scott Hall... Scott Hall
Harlem Heat Booker T... Booker Huffman
Harlem Heat Stevie Ray... Lane Huffman
High Voltage...
Akira Hokuto (Hisaki Uno)
Bobby Heenan... Raymond Heenan
Hulk Hogan... Terry Bollea
Rocky Iaukea... Mike Haynor
Disco Inferno... Glen Gilberti
Jesse James... Brian James
Jeff Jarrett... Jeff Jarrett
Chris Jericho... Chris Irvine
Billy Kidman...
Konnan... Charles Ashenoff
Carl Ouelett... Carl Joseph Yvon Ouelett
Buddy Lee... Dwayne Bruce
Lex Luger... Larry Pfohl
Mr. J.L... Jerry Lynn
Madusa... Debra Micelli
Dean Malenko... Dean Simon
Maxx...
Meng... Uliuli Fifita
Jacquelyn... Jacquelyn Moore
Debra McMichael... Debra McMichael
Steve McMichael... Steve McMichael
Rey Misterio Jr.... Oscar Gonzales
Hugh Morrus... William DeMott
Mortis... Chris Klucsaritis
Kevin Nash... Kevin Nash
Nasty Boy Nobbs... Brian Yandrisovitz
Nasty Boy Saggs... Jerry Segonowich
Scott Norton... Scott Norton
Paul Orndorff... Paul Orndorff
Diamond Dallas Page... Page Falkenberg

La Parka... Adolfo Tapia

Buddy Lee Parker... Dwayne Bruce

Col. Robert Parker... Robert Welch

Roddy Piper... Roderick Tombs

Craig Pittman... Craig Pittman

Psicosis... Dionicio Castellanos

Roadblock...

Renegade...

Scott Riggs... Scott Antol

Lord Steven Regal... Darren Mathews

Flyboy Rocco Rock... Ted Petty

Big Bubba Rogers... Ray Taylor

Jacques Rougeau... Jacques Rougeau

Randy Savage... Randy Poffo

John Tenta... John Tenta

Sister Sherri... Sherri Russell

Kevin Sullivan... Kevin Francis Sullivan

Mark Starr... Mark Ashford-Smith

Scott Steiner... Scott Rechsteiner

Rick Steiner... Robert Rechsteiner

Sting... Steve Borden

NWO Sting... Jeff Farmer

Devon Storm (Extremists)... Chris Ford

Syxx... Sean Waltman

Pat Tanaka... Patrick Tanaka

David Taylor... David Taylor

Terry Taylor... Paul Taylor

Ice Train... Harold Hoag

Luna Vachon... Angel Vachon

Robert Vandeberg... James Mitchell

Villano IV... Tomas Diaz Mendoza

Vincent... Mike Jones

Michael Wallstreet... Lawrence Rotunda

Robbie Walker... Robert Walker

Woman... Nancy Daus Sullivan

Alex Wright... Alex Wright

Larry Zbyszko... Larry Whistler

ECW

Chris Candido... Chris Candido
Paul E. Dangerously... Paul Heyman
Shane Douglas... Troy Martin
Buh Buh Ray Dudley... Mark Lomonica
Spike Dudley... Matt Hyson
D-Von Dudley...
Tommy Dreamer... Thomas Laughlin
Terry Funk... Terry Funk
Little Guido... James Stone
Eliminator Kronus... George Caiazo
Eliminator Saturn... Perry Satullo
Francine... Francine Fourmire
Gangsta Mustafa... Jamaal Mustafa
Gangsta New Jack... Jerome Young
Brian Lee... Brian Harris
Balls Mahoney... John Rickner
Blue Meanie... Brian Heffron
Beulah McGillicutty... Theresa Hays
Super Nova...
Pitbull #1... Gary Wolff
Pitbull #2... Anthony Durante
Raven... Scott Levy
Tommy Rich... Thomas Richardson
Steve Richards... Michael Manna
The Rookie... Chris Chetti
Axl Rotten... Brian Knighton
Rick Rude... Rick Rude
Sabu... Terry Brunk
Sandman... James Fullington
Louie Spicolli... Louie Mucciolo
Lance Storm... Lance Evvers
Joey Styles... Joe Bonsignore
Taz... Pete Senerchia
Rob Van Dam...
Mikey Whipwreck... John Watson
Steve Williams... Steve Williams

1996 YEARBOOK APPENDIX

BIG THREE TITLES CHANGES

WWF...

WWF Title

Shawn Michaels beat Bret Hart, 3/31, Anaheim, Calif.

Sycho Sid beat Michaels, 11/17, New York, N.Y.

WWF Tag Team Titles

Smoking Gunns beat Owen Hart & Yokozuna, 9/25, Grand Rapids, Mich.

Gunns vacated title due to Billy Gunn injured neck, March.

Body Donnas (Chris Candido & Tom Prichard) beat The Godwinns in tournament finals, 3/31, Anaheim, Calif.

Godwinns beat Body Donnas, 5/19, New York, N.Y.

Smoking Gunns beat Godwinns, 5/26, Florence, S.C.

Owen Hart & British Bulldog beat Gunns, 9/22, Philadelphia, Pa.

WWF Intercontinental Title

Razor Ramon (Scott Hall) beat Dean Douglas, 11/22, Winnipeg.

Goldust beat Ramon, 1/21, Fresno, Calif.

Title held up after Goldust-Savio Vega match, 4/1, San Bernardino, Calif.

Goldust beat Vega for held up title, 4/1, San Bernardino, Calif.

Ahmed Johnson beat Goldust, 6/23, Milwaukee, Wisc.

Ahmed vacated title due to kidney problems

Marc Mero beat Faarooq in tournament final, 9/23, Hershey, Pa.

Hunter Hearst Helmsley beat Marc Mero, 10/21, Fort Wayne, Ind.

WCW...

WCW Heavyweight Title

Randy Savage beat Ric Flair, 1/22, Las Vegas, Nev.

Ric Flair beat Savage, 2/11, St. Petersburg, Fla.

The Giant beat Flair, 4/22, Albany, Ga.

Hulk Hogan beat Giant, 8/10, Sturgis, S.C.

WCW Tag Team Titles

Lex Luger & Sting beat Harlem Heat, 1/22, Las Vegas, Nev.

Harlem Heat captured titles in a triangle match with champs Sting & Luger plus Rick & Scott Steiner, 6/24, Charlotte, N.C.

Steiners beat Heat, 7/24, Cincinnati, Ohio

Harlem Heat beat Steinners, 7/27, Dayton, Ohio

Public Enemy beat Heat, 9/23, Birmingham, Ala.

Harlem Heat beat Public Enemy, 10/1, Canton, Ohio

Scott Hall & Kevin Nash beat Harlem Heat, 10/27, Las Vegas, Nev.

WCW Cruiserweight Title

Shinjiro Otani beat Chris Benoit in an elimination match to become the first champion, 3/20, Nagoya, Japan

Dean Malenko beat Otani, 5/2, Orlando, Fla.

Rey Misterio Jr. beat Malenko, 7/8, Orlando, Fla.

Dean Malenko beat Rey Jr., 10/27, Las Vegas, Nev.

Ultimo Dragon beat Malenko, 12/27, Nashville,

Tenn.

U.S. Heavyweight Title

Konnann beat One Man Gang, 1/29, Canton, Ohio

Ric Flair beat Konnan, 7/7, Daytona Beach, Fla.

Flair vacated title due to injury.

Eddie Guerrero beat Diamond Dallas Page in tournament final, 12/29, Nashville, Tenn.

WCW TV Title

Johnny B. Badd beat Dallas Page, 10/29, Detroit, Mich.

Lex Luger beat Badd, 2/17, Baltimore, Md.

Johnny B. Badd beat Luger, 2/18, Norfolk, Va.

Lex Luger beat Johnny B. Badd, 3/6, Macon, Ga.

Steven Regal beat Luger, 8/20, Dalton, Ga.

ECW...

ECW Heavyweight Title

Raven beat Sandman, 1/27, Philadelphia, Pa.

Sandman pinned Steve Richards (subbing for Raven, who took a personal leave of absence before leaving the promotion) to capture the title, 10/5, Philadelphia, Pa.

Raven beat Sandman, 12/7, Philadelphia, Pa.

ECW Tag Team

Eliminators beat Cactus Jack & Mikey Whipwreck, 2/3, New York, N.Y.

Gangstas won a four way elimination tag team match over The Eliminators, Samoan Gangstas, Bruiser Brothers, 8/3, Philadelphia, Pa.

ECW TV Title

Too Cold Scorpio beat Mikey Whipwreck, 1/5, Philadelphia

Shane Douglas beat Scorpio, 5/11, Philadelphia

Pitbull2 beat Douglas, 6/1, Philadelphia

Chris Jericho beat Pitbull2, 6/22, Philadelphia

Shane Douglas won a four-corners match over Scorpio, Pitbull2, Jericho to win the belt, 7/13, Philadelphia, Pa.

PPV RESULTS/STATISTICS

WWF...

Royal Rumble: Jan. 21, Fresno, Calif. (Selland Arena), 9,600 sellout (\$130,000), est. buyrate 1.1 (\$3.56 million)...

Results: Ahmed Johnson beat Jeff Jarrett via DQ (*1/4), Smoking Gunns beat Body Donnas to retain the tag titles (**1/2), Goldust beat Razor Ramon (**3/4), Shawn Michaels eliminated Diesel at 58:45 to win the Royal Rumble (***), Undertaker beat Bret Hart via DQ at 28:02 to retain the WWF Title (**1/2)... Torch poll results: 6.8 (1-10 score average), 30-man Rumble (best match), Jarrett vs. Ahmed (worst match)...

In Your House: Feb. 18 in Louisville, Ky. (Louisville Gardens), 5,500 sellout (\$83,000), Est. buyrate 0.75 (\$1.61 million)...

Results: Ramon pinned 1-2-3 Kid (***1/4), Hunter Hearst Helmsley pinned Duke Droese (*3/4), Yokozuna beat British Bulldog via DQ (*), Michaels pinned Owen Hart (****), Bret Hart beat Diesel at 19:11 to retain the WWF Title (*)... Torch poll results: 6.1, Michaels vs. Owen (best), Diesel vs. Bret

(worst)...

Wrestlemania XII: Mar. 31 in Anaheim, Calif. (Arrowhead Pond), 15,844 (12,909 paid, \$737,449), Est. buyrate 1.2 (\$4.0 million)...

Results: Vader & Owen & British Bulldog beat Jake Roberts & Ahmed & Yokozuna (**1/2), Roddy Piper fought Goldust to a no contest, Steve Austin beat Savio Vega (**3/4), Ultimate Warrior pinned Hunter at 1:39 (1/4*), Undertaker pinned Diesel (***1/4), Michaels pinned Bret (****1/4)... Torch poll results: 7.6, Michaels vs. Bret (best), Ultimate vs. Hunter (worst)...

In Your House: Apr. 28, Omaha, Neb. (Civic Center), 9,563 sellout (8,273 paid, \$120,668), Est. buyrate: 0.65 (\$1.4 million)...

Results: Bulldog & Owen beat Jake & Ahmed (*1/2), Ultimate beat Goldust via countout, so Goldust retained the IC Title at 7:38 (NR), Vader pinned Razor Ramon at 14:56 (**1/4), BodyDonnas beat Godwinns to retain the tag titles at 7:00 (*1/2), Michaels pinned Diesel at 17:47 to retain the WWF Title (****3/4)... Torch poll results: 7.0, Michaels vs. Diesel (best), Goldust vs. Ultimate (worst)...

IYH Beware of Dog: May 26, North Charleston, S.C. (Coliseum), 6,000 (4,796 paid, \$63,435) and May 28, Florence, S.C. (Civic Center), make-up card due to blackout two nights earlier...

Results 5/26: Mero beat Hunter (***), Michaels fought Bulldog to a double pin draw at 17:19 to retain the WWF Title (**1/2)... Results 5/28: Vega beat Austin in a strap match (****), Vader pinned Yokozuna (**), Goldust beat Undertaker in a casket match (***)... Torch poll results: 6.8, Austin vs. Vega (best), Michaels vs. Bulldog (worst)

King of the Ring: June 23, Milwaukee, Wisc. (Milwaukee Center), 8,300 sellout (6,400 paid, \$72,000), Est. buyrate 0.71 (\$2.23 million)... Austin pinned Hero (semi-finals), Jake beat Vader via DQ (semi-finals), Gunns beat Godwinns at 9:57 to retain the WWF Tag Titles (*1/4), Ultimate pinned Jerry Lawler at 3:50 (*), Mankind beat Undertaker (***1/4), Ahmed beat Goldust at 15:32 to capture the IC Title (***1/4), Austin beat Jake at 4:45 to win the King of the Ring tournament (1/2*). Michaels pinned Bulldog at 25:26 to retain the WWF Title (****3/4)... Torch poll results: 7.0, Michaels vs. Bulldog (best), Lawler vs. Ultimate (worst)...

IYH International Incident: July 21 in Vancouver, B.C. (General Motors Place), 14,804 (11,955 paid, \$214,985), Est. buyrate 0.70 (\$1.08 million)...

Results: BodyDonnas beat Gunns (1/2*), Mankind beat Henry Godwinn (3/4*), Austin beat Mero (***), Undertaker beat Goldust via DQ (**), Vader & Owen & Bulldog beat Michaels & Ahmed & Sid when Sid pinned Michaels (***)... Torch poll results: 6.3, Six-man tag (best), Mankind vs. Godwinn (worst)...

SummerSlam: Aug. 18 in Cleveland, Ohio (Gund Arena), 17,000 (14,926 paid, \$413,168), Est. buyrate: 0.58 (\$1.74 million)...

Results: Owen pinned Savio (**), Gunns beat New Rockers, Body Donnas, Godwinns in a four-way match (1/4*), Sid pinned Bulldog (*), Goldust beat Mero (**1/2), Lawler pinned Jake (1/2*), Michaels pinned Vader at 22:15 to retain the WWF Title

1996 YEARBOOK APPENDIX

(****)... Torch poll results: 6.1, Michaels vs. Vader (best), Four-way tag (worst)...

IYH Mindgames: Sept. 22 in Philadelphia, Pa. (Core State Center): 15,000 (11,969 paid, \$210,290), Est. buyrate: 0.48 (\$960,000)...

Results: Vega beat Justin Hawk Bradshaw (3/4*), Jose Lothario pinned Jim Cornette (NR), Owen & Bulldog beat Gunns to capture tag titles at 10:56 (**3/4), Lawler beat Mark Henry (1/2*), Undertaker beat Goldust (*1/4), Michaels beat Mankind via DQ at 27:00 (****1/4)... Torch poll results: 7.1, Michaels vs. Mankind (best), Lothario vs. Cornette (worst)...

IYH Buries Alive: Oct. 20 in Indianapolis, Ind. (Market Square Arena): 9,469 (8238 paid, \$135,605), Est. buyrate: 0.40 (\$798,000)...

Results: Austin pinned Hunter (***1/4), Owen & Bulldog beat Gunns (**1/2), Mero beat Goldust at 11:34 to retain the IC Title (**3/4), Sid pinned Vader (1/2*), Undertaker beat Mankind (***1/2)... Torch poll results: 6.5, Mankind vs. Undertaker (best), Sid vs. Vader (worst)...

Survivor Series: Nov. 17 in New York, N.Y. (Madison Square Garden): 18,674 (16,266 paid, \$529,522), Est. buyrate 0.58 (\$1.74 million)...

Results: Doug Furnas & Phil Lafon & Godwinns beat Owen & Bulldog & Rockers (**1/4), Undertaker pinned Mankind (**3/4), Mero & Stalker & Rocky Maivia (WWF debut) & Jake beat Hunter & Goldust & Lawler & Crush (**1/4), Bret pinned Austin at 28:34 to earn a title shot at the next PPV (****1/2), Faarooq & New Razor & New Diesel & Vader fought Savio & Flash & Yokozuna & Jimmy Snuka to a DDQ (*), Sid pinned Shawn Michaels at 20:02 to capture the WWF Title (**3/4)... Torch poll results: 8.1, Bret vs. Austin (best) Ramon & Diesel & Faarooq & Vader tag match (worst)...

IYH It's Time: Dec. 15 in West Palm Beach, Fla. (Memorial Auditorium): 5,708 sellout (4,581 paid, \$69,018), Est. buyrate 0.35 (\$785,000)...

Results: Flash beat Leif Cassidy (***), Bulldog & Owen beat Razor & Diesel at 10:25 to retain the tag titles (**1/2), Mero beat Hunter via countout at 14:21 to retain the IC Title (***1/4), Undertaker pinned Executioner (**), Sid pinned Bret at 17:00 after a powerbomb to retain the WWF Title thanks to inadvertent interference from Michaels (who was doing color commentary at ringside) (***)... Torch poll results: 7.0, Mero vs. Hunter (best), Undertaker beat Executioner (worst)...

WCW...

SuperBrawl: Feb. 11 in St. Petersburg, Fla. (Bayfront Center): 7,200 sellout (6,000 paid, \$90,000), Est. buyrate 0.60 (\$1.81 million)...

Results: Nasty Boys beat Public Enemy (***), Johnny B. Badd pinned Dallas Page to retain the TV Title, Lex Luger & Sting beat Harlem Heat (*1/4), Konnan pinned One Man Gang to retain the U.S. Title (1/2*), Kevin Sullivan beat Brian Pillman in a strap match, Sting & Lex Luger fought The Road Warriors to a DDQ dDud, Ric Flair pinned Randy Savage at 18:50 to capture the WCW Title (***), Hulk Hogan beat The Giant at 14:59 in a cage match... Torch poll results: 5.1, Flair vs. Savage (best), OMG vs. Konnan

(worst)...

Uncensored: Mar. 24 in Tupelo, Ms. (Coliseum): 9,000 (7,300 paid, \$104,000), Est. buyrate: 0.70 (\$2.1 million)...

Results: Konnan beat Eddie Guerrero to retain the U.S. Title (***1/4), Belfast Bruiser beat Steve Regal via DQ (**1/2), Robert Parker pinned Madusa (NR), Booty Man pinned Diamond Dallas Page (*), Giant pinned Loch Ness (1/2*), Sting & Booker T beat The Road Warriors at 29:37 so Sting & Luger won the tag titles (**3/4), Hogan & Savage beat Meng & barbarian & Ultimate Solution & Za Gangsta & Arn Anderson & Ric Flair in a three-tiered cage match at 25:12... Torch poll results: 2.8, Sting & Booker T vs. Warriors (best), Giant vs. Loch Ness (worst)...

Slamboree: May 19 in Baton Rouge, La. (Riverside Centreplex): 7,791 (6,308 paid, \$104,760), Est. buyrate 0.44 (\$1.24 million)...

Results: Animal & Booker T fought Hawk & Lex Luger to a DCO at 5:30 (*), Public Enemy beat Kevin Sullivan & Chris benoit (**), Rick Steiner & Booty Man beat Craig Pittman & Scott Steiner (**), Hacksaw Duggan & V.K. Wallstreet beat Regal & David Taylor (*), Dick Slater & Robert Eaton beat Disco Inferno & Alex Wright (*1/2), Diamond Dallas Page & barbarian beat Meng & Hugh Morrus (*1/4), Fire & Ice beat Stevie Ray & Big Bubba (1/2*), Flair & Steve beat Arn Anderson & Eddie Guerrero, Dean Malenko pinned Brad Armstrong (**1/2), Slater & Eaton beat Duggan & Wallstreet (*), Page & Barbarian beat Rick Steiner & Booty Man (*), Konnan pinned Jushin Liger to retain the U.S. Title at 9:08 (***), Page pinned Barbarian in the BattleBowl Finals (**), Giant pinned Sting to at 10:37 to retain the WCW Title (***1/4)... Torch poll results: 2.8, Konnan vs. Liger (best), Lethal Lottery (worst)...

Great American Bash: June 16 in Baltimore, Md. (Arena): 9,000 (7,233 paid, \$123,406 paid), Est. buyrate 0.48 (\$1.32 million)...

Results: Steiners beat Ice Train & Scott Norton (**1/2), Konnan pinned El Gato (Pat Tanaka) at 6:00 to retain the U.S. Title (**), Page pinned Marcus Bagwell (**1/4), Dean Malenko pinned Rey Jr. at 17:44 (***3/4), Big John Tenta pinned Big Bubba (*1/4), Benoit pinned Sullivan (***), Sting beat Regal (**1/4), Flair & Anderson beat Steve McMichael & Kevin Greene (***1/2) when McMichael turned heel and joined the Horsemen, Giant pinned Luger at 9:36 to retain WCW Title (*3/4)... Known as the event where Hall & Nash slammed Eric Bischoff off a stage through tables below... Torch poll results: 8.6, Malenko vs. Rey Jr. (best), Tenta vs. Bubba (worst)...

Bash at the Beach: July 7 in Daytona Beach, Fla. (Ocean Center): 8,300 sellout (6,400 paid, \$72,000), Est. buyrate 0.71 (\$2.23 million)...

Results: Rey Jr. pinned Psicosis at 15:15 (****1/4), Tenta pinned Bubba (*1/4), Page pinned Duggan (*), Nastys beat Public Enemy (**), Malenko beat Disco (***1/4), McMichael pinned Gomez (DUD), Flair pinned Konnan at 15:42 to capture the U.S. Title (**), Giant & Sullivan beat Benoit & Anderson (*1/2), Hall & Nash & Hogan fought Sting & Luger & Savage to a no-contest... Hogan's heel turn as the surprise third man joining the Outsiders rendered the rest of the match virtually irrelevant afterward... Torch poll

results: 8.1, Psicosis vs. Rey Jr. (best), Duggan vs. Page (worst)...

Hog Wild: Aug. 10 in Sturgis, S.C. at the Motor Cycle Rally: Est. live attendance: 5,000 (free outdoor show), Est. buyrate 0.62 (\$1.42 million)...

Results: Rey Jr. beat Ultimo Dragon to retain the Cruiserweight Title at 11:35 (***3/4), Norton beat Ice Train (*), Madusa pinned Bull Nakano (**), Benoit pinned Malenko (***3/4), Heat beat Steiners at 17:57 to retain tag titles (***). Flair pinned Eddie Guerrero at 14:10 to retain the U.S. Title (***1/2), Hall & Nash beat Luger & Sting (**), Hogan pinned Giant to capture the WCW Title at 14:56 (DUD)... Torch reader poll: 6.3, Benoit vs. Malenko (best), Norton vs. Train (worst)...

Fall Brawl: Sept. 15 in Winston-Salem, N.C. (Lawrence Joel Coliseum): 11,300 (10,714 paid, \$153,914), Est. buyrate 0.65, \$1.62 million...

Results: Page pinned Chavo Guerrero Jr. (***), Ice Train beat Norton (*), Konnan beat Juventud (***1/4), Benoit beat Chris Jericho (****), Rey Jr. beat Super Calo (***1/4), Heat beat Nastys (**), Giant beat Savage (*1/4), Hogan & Hall & Nash & NWO Sting beat Luger & Flair & Arn & Sting in War Games (***)... Torch poll results: 5.4, Rey Jr. vs. Calo (best), WarGames (worst)...

Halloween Havoc: Oct. 27 in Las Vegas, Nev. (Caesar's Palace): 10,000 (8,390 paid, \$224,660), Est. buyrate 0.70 (\$1.96 million)...

Malenko pinned Rey Jr. (****1/2), Page pinned Eddie Guerrero (***), Giant beat Jeff Jarrett via DQ (**), Syxx pinned Jericho (***1/2), Luger beat Anderson (*1/4), McMichael & Benoit beat Faces of Fear, Hall & P Nash beat Heat (***), Hogan pinned Savage to retain the WCW Title at 18:36 (*3/4)... The headline from the event was Roddy Piper making his WCW debut confronting Hogan after the main event... Torch poll results: 6.1, Rey Jr. vs. Malenko (best), Hogan vs. Savage (worst)...

World War 3: Nov. 24 in Norfolk, Va. (Scope): 10,314 sellout (7,018 paid, \$118,000), Est. buyrate 0.55 (\$1.37 million)...

Results: Dragon beat Rey Jr. (****1/4), Jericho pinned Nick Patrik (*1/4), Giant pinned Jarrett (**), Heat beat Amazing French Canadians, Malenko beat Psicosis (**3/4), Hall & Nash beat Faces of Fear (*1/2), Giant eliminated Luger and Nash to win the three-ring, 30 man battle royal... Torch poll results: 3.6, Dragon vs. Rey Jr. (best), Patrik vs. Jericho (worst)...

Starrcade: Dec. 29, Nashville, Tenn. (Municipal Auditorium): 9,030 sellout (8,327 paid, \$113,040), Est. buyrate: 0.95 \$2.9 million)...

Results: Akira Hokuto beat Madusa (*3/4), Liger pinned Rey Jr. at 4:20 (****), Jarrett beat Benoit (***1/4), Hall & Nash beat Faces of Fear (*1/4), Eddie Guerrero beat Dallas Page to win the U.S. Title tournament (***), Luger beat Giant (*1/4), Piper beat Hogan with a sleeper at 15:35 in a non-title match (*3/4)... Torch poll results: 7.2, Malenko vs. Dragon (best), Hall & Nash vs. Faces (worst)...